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FINAL FANTASY XV

Hands-on verdict with Square's make or break RPG

CAN POKÉMON GO BE REPEATED?

THE MOBILE HITS NINTENDO HAS IN THE WORKS



THE KILLER EXCLUSIVE

DISHONORED 2™

STEALTH TRANSFORMED • NEW POWERS REVEALED • ARKANE INTERROGATED

SONIC MANIA

How the fans have revived the ailing hedgehog

THE LAST GUARDIAN

What has Sony been hiding for the last ten years?

CREEPIER THAN BIOSHOCK?

We Happy Few challenges the triple-A Big Daddies

HIGHLIGHTS

• CALL OF DUTY: INFINITE WARFARE • CIVILIZATION VI • NO MAN'S SKY • DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED • METAL GEAR SURVIVE • WORMS WMD • CHRONO TRIGGER • THE ASSEMBLY • BATMAN: THE TELLTALE SERIES • OVERCOOKED • HEADLANDER • QUADRILATERAL COWBOY • ABZU



The rise of *Dishonored* as one of the most highly respected, creative and passionately followed games of the modern era strikes me as a story of perseverance on the part of Arkane. This isn't a studio with a back catalogue of massive hits behind it, but it is a studio with a long list of promising projects and high-profile suitors. That the likes of Steven Spielberg and EA would tap up this team to support a project (*LMNO*, which actually never happened) reveals a great deal about the talent and potential the industry was seeing in Arkane long before the rest of us could witness it.

Another project I recall getting very excited about around 2008 was *The Crossing*, an ambitious merger of single-player narrative experience with multiplayer as you could play as either the solo hero or the mass of enemies they had to defeat. This was long before the trend of asymmetrical multiplayer experiences, in the fledgling days on online console play. It was a bold, strange and interesting take on the FPS and that seems to be Arkane all over. After so many years of being on the cusp of a big release, it's great to see this studio make it on its own terms with such a hardcore gaming experience.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR





Floating Eyeball
Helldiver 2


178
176



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Jonathan Gordon
Editor





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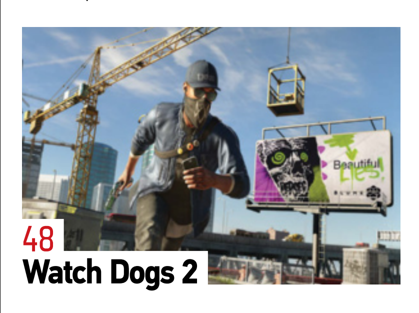
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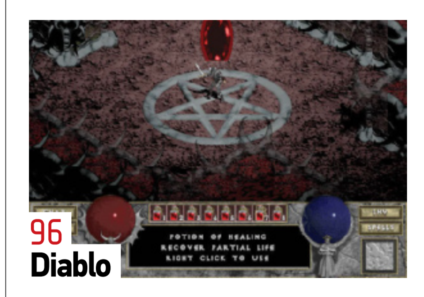
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DISHONORED 2

Arkane reveals how it emerged from the shadows to become a new Triple-A powerhouse

Discuss

NEWS
INDUSTRY GOSSIP
OPINION
YOUR VIEWS



BREAKING THE FEVER

Can Pokémon GO be repeated?

→ As Niantic's mobile experience goes from strength to strength we look at what comes next

Pokémon Go has been, unquestionably, the biggest hit of the summer – but can anyone ever hope to replicate it? Are there lessons that can be learnt from how Niantic approached the project or was it a fluke of circumstances, branding and a good launch date? Could something replace it?

Looking at the game as it exists now, you'd perhaps be correct in your observation that there's seemingly nothing in this world that could topple it. After all, it took just two weeks to establish *Pokémon Go* as one of the most successful mobile games of all time. Niantic is boasting a record that sees its game installed on more than ten per cent of Android phones and, with downloads soaring well past 15 million across both Android and iOS devices, *Pokémon Go* has overtaken the likes of Tinder and Twitter in popularity. It has survived broken patches, Legendary Pokémon disappearing and fan backlashes against both gameplay changes and Terms of Service enforcement; but still it persists.

Undoubtedly one of the biggest reasons for this is the Pokémon brand itself, which makes it so appealing to children and adults alike. Its core demographic is anyone young enough to appreciate Pokémon now to anyone who was young enough to appreciate it when the pocket monsters were first released in 1996. In order to have any hope of matching this breadth of interest you would likely need an established brand to build something upon. Fans of *Harry Potter* started a petition (and even cut together a trailer) for a *Harry Potter Go* game. *Star Wars* also springs to mind as an IP with a fanbase always ready to support new works. In gaming there are few franchises with the pull of *Pokémon* and ageless appeal. Even the likes of *Mario* and *Sonic* would struggle in this regard.

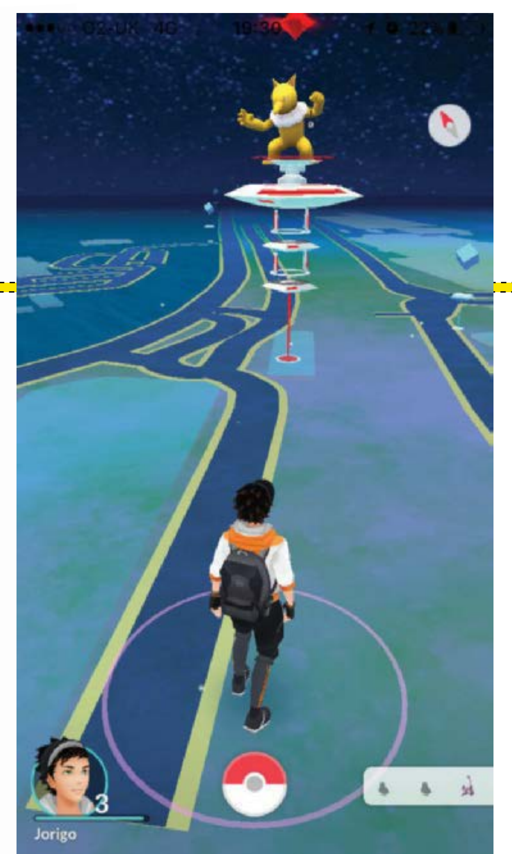
> "The Pokémon Go business model is built on two pillars: getting you to go outside and microtransactions"

The second key element is the excellent fit of game experience and brand legacy, as finding and catching Pokémon gets to the heart of what people have always loved about games from this series. *Go* simplified it and made it more social. It also found a way to make it profitable.

The *Pokémon Go* business model is built on two pillars: getting you to go outside and microtransactions. The two work in tandem; you walk yourself into a new area of the world where, suddenly, you find yourself without a Poké Ball in your pocket and a Mr. Mime is right there in front of you. So what do you do, go home? As if. You've just spent 20 minutes walking around and you only need to go another few kilometres to get that 10km egg open, and so you drop a couple

Above What form might a Mario game take on iOS and Android devices and could it ever hope to be as successful as *Pokémon Go*? We're keen to find out

DATA STREAM → FINAL FANTASY XV HAS BEEN DELAYED FROM 30 SEPTEMBER TO 29 NOVEMBER







Inset Many high-profile publishers have attempted to transpant successful console series to mobile devices. While sales are often good, none have matched the likes of *Pokémon Go*, *Clash Of Clans* or *Angry Birds*.

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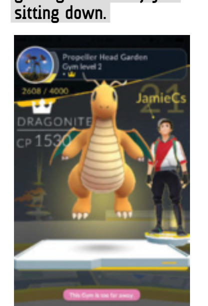
of pounds on the game (because what's a few quid, right?) if it means the walk wasn't wasted. It's a smart system that doesn't feel too intrusive.

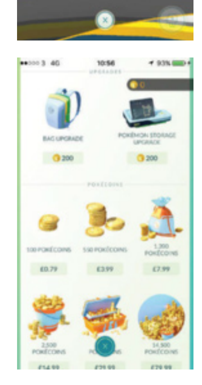
How would a developer to build on this? Well, there have been plenty of mobile games, like *Clash Of Clans* or *Candy Crush*, that have been hugely successful in incentivising and monetising play, but the model of making money isn't why people love these titles. It is the integration of a fun gameplay loop into something no more intrusive than answering a text message. *Pokémon Go* just slipped into the cracks in our lives.

The result is what a bonafide phenomenon looks like in action. And in spite of it appearing to have arrived out of nowhere, *Pokémon Go* has been 20 years in the making. Pokémon has always enjoyed huge cultural impact, arguably because of the impact of the original *Red/Blue* releases and *that* TV series. Nostalgia is a wonderful thing and *Pokémon Go* has allowed anybody that grew up with even the vaguest knowledge of the brand (or Pikachu) the opportunity to become a Trainer.

This model is making everybody - from Niantic to Nintendo - a lot of money, but its economic success and general playability is also partially determined (if not wholly dictated) by the weather, which might yet prove to be this game's Achilles' heel. A gameplay design that only works as intended when its users are walking around - to capture and hatch Pokémon - is both fantastic and novel in equal measure, but it's also seasonal. It will continue to have its fans - that much is

Below *Pokémon Go* has been hugely successful for everybody involved, but it's difficult to see how it can be sustained. It's amazing that Niantic has gotten all of us outside, but it's been a stark reminder that gaming is best enjoyed sitting down.





certain - though its world conquering success is likely to dwindle as temperatures begin to drop around the Northern Hemisphere.

Niantic is aware of this, seemingly, and is already preparing a suite of updates and changes to the game to keep player interest high for as long as possible. From the re-introduction of Legendary Pokémon, to the addition of PokéCentres, player trading and a new generation of Pokémon to the PokéDex. No timeframe is available on how and when these updates will become a reality, but the truth is that they may not have the impact - or offer the sustainability - that investors are no doubt imagining it should do.

For many, it's been the thing geeky dreams are made of. But moving forward, the player base is likely to splinter. Those frustrated by the technical imperfections will be the first to stray and completionists with no task left to conquer will be next. Eventually, the gamers who remembered that they played videogames so that they wouldn't *need* to go outside and interact with the world will move into something more traditional.

Pokémon Go's success doesn't appear to be replicable or even sustainable in the long term. It won't disappear from the public consciousness entirely, but meeting and conversing with Trainers out in the wild or seeing people chasing Pokémon down the street in their pyjamas are likely coming to an end. We're left to remember the good times, look to see who moves first to attempt something similar and wrap up warm the winter.

Nintendo's roadmap to mobile success

Here's how the Japanese company has planned things

MIITOMO

Miitomo was Nintendo's first major foray into the world of mobile gaming and it disappeared far quicker than the publisher would have hoped or liked. After enjoying an initial rush of interest, securing over 10 million users, the release - which focused on social interactions - quickly faded from the public consciousness. Ultimately, Nintendo will have learned some valuable lessons on service and player retention from its *Miitomo* experience as it looks to expand deeper into the industry.

FIRE EMBLEM

Fire Emblem will be the first of four new smartphone apps coming from Nintendo in the next six months and it's a strange fit for the device. *Fire Emblem* is a niche brand; a tactical RPG that lends itself well to long, intense gameplay sessions as you seek to ensure all of your characters make it out of battle alive. This will be an interesting conversion, though it isn't likely to have a huge impact.

ANIMAL CROSSING

This could be huge. *Animal Crossing* is a wonderful game series, letting you live out a day-to-day routine in a town populated by an array of anthropomorphic animals. *Animal Crossing* is designed for short pick-up and play bursts and seems perfectly suited to smartphone gaming. If Nintendo can get the in-app purchasing balance right on this F2P title, it could be a hit.

NX

An interesting rumour was circulating as we head off to print, noting that Nintendo is in discussion with many of its most trusted development teams to integrate Augmented Reality into their upcoming NX games. The rumoured home console/handheld hybrid could support multiple titles that function in a similar fashion to *Pokémon GO*, it seems, which would indicate Nintendo sees a future in AR gaming.



NO MAN'S SKY IS SONY'S SECOND BIGGEST LAUNCH FOR PS4 AFTER UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END

IS IT TIME TO UPGRADE?

Should you buy an Xbox One S?

→ Microsoft has just released its mid-console refresh, the Xbox One S. But is it really worth upgrading when new and improved tech is on the near horizon?

"Should I buy an Xbox One S?" That's the question that has been asked by gamers across the globe ever since Microsoft unveiled its new beautiful white box at E3. By standing (quite literally, as the console can be positioned vertically) at some 40 per cent smaller than the original Xbox One, in offering a new (and hugely improved) controller, in ditching Kinect and hiding the power brick inside the box, the Xbox One S is the must own piece of hardware for 2016. Unless you already own an Xbox One. Unless you are eager to play the likes of *Halo* and *Forza* in virtual reality or excited by the prospect of 4K gaming in 2017. So, wait, should you buy an Xbox One S?

It's a difficult question to answer, because it's difficult to know whether Microsoft really knows itself. What we can say for certain is this, the Xbox One S is the console Microsoft should have released back in 2013. It fits comfortably into your existing entertainment set up, it looks sleek and gorgeous – like every piece of expensive technology should do – and, ultimately, it doesn't handle or function like a device that feels like it was designed to take over your living room rather than deliver the very best in gaming experiences.

Of course, that's an unfair assessment, as it's only through the relentless progression of technology that we can receive such a lovely product as this. But as far as mid-cycle console refreshes go, this is perhaps one of the best ever released commercially. The problem is that Xbox One S is about to be superseded by a vastly more powerful console in the Xbox family – Scorpio, which is going to release next year and introduce 4K gaming, virtual reality and unlock more processing power for developers to play with than they've ever had access to before.

That leaves the Xbox One S in a limbo of sorts. It's one of the most affordable 4K media hubs on the market – supporting both 4K UHD disks and streaming – offers a stunning back catalogue of games, and is even going to (supposedly) offer slight graphical improvements to this year's suite of exclusives, from *Gears Of War 4* to *Forza Horizon 3*. We say 'supposedly' because Microsoft has decided to release its new console without any HDR-



"A stunning piece of technology that struggles to find a reason for being in the living room"



Above The PS4 remains the console to beat, but with Neo details inbound and PlayStation VR about to launch the Xbox One as it currently stands may struggle to compete. All eyes will be on what Microsoft does with the Xbox Scorpio, its 4K gaming console.



Above The Xbox One S includes a redesigned controller, implementing some of the technology found in the Elite gamepad. There's more tension in the thumbsticks, perfect for FPS games; while the textured effect on the grips helps improve general comfort levels for long gaming sessions.

DATA STREAM → THE MAKER OF ALLISON ROAD HAS RESTARTED PRODUCTION AS FAR FROM HOME

Right Format wars are back, this time for 4K TVs. If you're going after an HDR-ready set, make sure you find one that supports HDR 10, not Dolby Vision, to be prepared for the future.

supported games available to test, play or enjoy; a bizarre move that's more of a missed opportunity than anything else.

One thing we know for certain, however, is that those looking to make the jump to 4K with an HDR-ready TV will need to be cautious. Microsoft is opting to support HDR 10 as standard, while some new screens only support Dolby Vision – format wars continue to be a blight on early adopters, let's just hope this turns out more successfully for Microsoft than its pursuit of HD-DVD. As with anything that costs a sizeable chunk out of your bank balance: research is your friend, trust no-one.

If you are lucky enough to have the appropriate television, you'll find yourself largely impressed by watching video – on both Blu-Ray and Netflix – in 4K, though the difference isn't as blinding as the jump was from standard definition to HD. The console is, it's worth pointing out, technically more powerful than the original Xbox One – though you won't likely see that make a huge difference to your games. The hard drive isn't an SSD, so don't expect to see load times reduced, though the console does run *a lot* quieter and cooler than before – which is certainly something.

If anything is truly worth praising though, it's the redesigned controller. Honestly, it might just be the best damned gaming controller ever made (don't @ us). It's a little smaller, sleeker and wonderful to have in your hands. The plastic has a textured feel to improve grip, the d-pad is more responsive – as are the thumb sticks – and it *finally* supports both Bluetooth and has a standard 3.5mm jack at the bottom.

So, the Xbox One S: a stunning piece of technology that struggles to find a reason for being in the living room. If you already own an Xbox One, it's difficult to justify the upgrade – unless you're sick of the power brick, heat and noise, then you'll love it – especially with Scorpio arriving next year. That all said, once you have one of these beauties under your TV for a few days, it's *really* difficult to go back.

Still, the same goes for those looking to purchase an Xbox One in general, yes you should absolutely buy the Xbox One S over its predecessor, but wouldn't you rather wait and see what the Scorpio has to offer? Ultimately, if you have a 4K TV and are looking for an affordable media hub, this is the best there is right now. The Xbox One S is a stunning console in many respects; it's truly a pleasure to see it sat underneath your TV, but the question of whether you should buy one or not is near-impossible to answer. If you can wait to see what Scorpio offers, you probably should. But if you just can't wait, we're fairly certain you won't be disappointed.



Above Games such as *Gears Of War 4* and *Forza Horizon 3* will look better on the Xbox One S thanks to support for HDR lighting features in these games. HDR improves the contrast ratio of the picture you get from the Xbox One S, meaning brighter lights and even deeper shade on the screen.



Above The Xbox One S doesn't support Kinect out of the box, though you can plug a headset into the bottom of the controller and make use of Cortana – the overhauled voice control system.



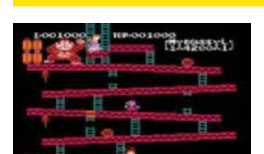


NOSTALGIA MATTERS

5 reasons why we're excited about the NES Nintendo Classic Mini

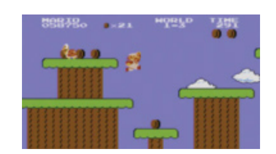
→ We break down all the ways in which Nintendo's surprising move into plug and play is a cause for celebration

Above The NES Mini is small enough to fit into the palm of your hand, which is no great surprise since the games are likely to be running from flash memory inside the device, which wouldn't take up too much space.



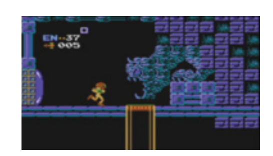
IT'S A GREAT SELECTION OF GAMES

1 Of the 30 titles included on the NES Mini, eight were recently included in **Retro Gamer**'s 150 greatest games of all time. Not a bad hit rate by any standard, but big gets like the original *Final Fantasy* and *Castlevania* help to bolster first-party hits like the *Super Mario* series or *The Legend Of Zelda*. Those games alone promise hours of game time, but the inclusion of puzzlers like *Dr Mario* and the arcade experiences of *Donkey Kong* and *Pac-Man* mean there are some nice quick gaming fixes in there too. Something for everyone, then.



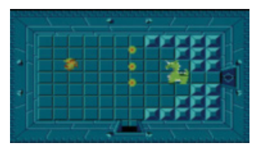
THE PRICE IS SOLID

2 At £49.99 in the UK and $59.99 in the US, the NES mini is very competitively priced compared to other plug and play devices. For instance, the Atari Flashback 6 retails for about £44.99 with 100 games. Better value for money from the Atari system, perhaps, but is the quality of games as high? If you want a second controller – and we imagine that you will – it's currently being priced at $10, which seems pretty reasonable, not that you need it if you have a Wii Classic Controller to hand. So, a little bit of a premium, but these titles feel hand picked.



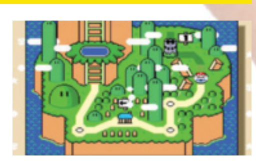
THE RETRO PICTURE OPTIONS ARE GREAT

3 In a nice touch from Nintendo, the games on the NES Mini can be enjoyed the way you remember them with CRT visual options. What's more it will shift the aspect ratio to 4:3, mimicking the classic TVs we grew up using when we enjoyed this console the first time around. Of course its actual output is HDMI (and only HDMI we should add) and offers a 'pixel perfect' option that shows every pixel as a square. We are curious to see how crisp the images actually appear as Virtual Console titles have sometimes looked a little muddy.



IT ADDS SAVING FOR THOSE WHO NEED IT

4 While hardcore traditionalists may scoff at the idea, we're still pleased to know that saving has been added to every game on the system. That includes suspend points where you can leave a game and then return to it later, picking up where you left off. There will also be permanent save functionality in all of the games so that you can move onto another titles and feel safe in the knowledge that should you return to Hyrule or the Mushroom Kingdom, everything will be where you left it without the need for codes or starting again from scratch.



IT COULD MEAN A SNES MINI NEXT

5 Nintendo isn't being drawn on its plans passed the NES Mini, but it doesn't seem outlandish to assume that if this plug and play machine is a success then the Japanese firm will give serious consideration to releasing its follow-up in a similar fashion. Even if it were limited to games published by Nintendo we could think of about 20 titles that would instantly be added to the machine that could also be considered 20 of the best games ever made. So, if only to see *A Link To The Past*, *Super Mario World* and *Pilot Wings* all bundled together, we're hoping the NES Mini is a success.

DATA STREAM → RIME HAS RETURNED WITH A 2017 LAUNCH EXPECTED ACROSS MULTIPLE PLATFORMS

BIG WHEELS

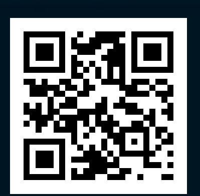
World War One comes to World Of Tanks

→ Wargaming is celebrating 100 years of the first battlefield tank deployment with special events and an app

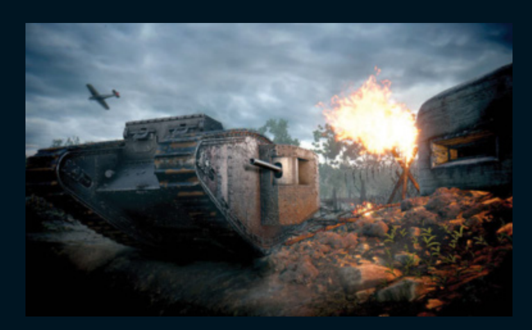
From 15 September 2016 *World Of Tanks* will begin its anniversary of 100 years of tank deployment on the battlefield with special events across its titles. On 15 September 1916 the Mark I tank became the first such vehicle to be deployed as it was sent out during the Battle of the Somme. To mark this historic occasion *World Of Tanks* is bringing the Mark I to PC, consoles and *World Of Tanks Blitz* on mobile devices.

Each format will be getting its own bespoke content marking the anniversary. On PC a two-week in-game event called Convoy will see players escorting a Mark I with the use of Lanchester Armoured Cars. On consoles a Trench Warfare mode will launch for a limited time. In this game type you will be able to use Mark I tanks in intense trench combat with new features such as flamethrower bunkers and ground explosions to keep you occupied. And finally on mobile, *Blitz* will see all players given a Mark I tank for their inventory for one week that can be used in a special game type exclusive to Mark I pilots.

All of this is being done as part of Wargaming's anniversary plans in conjunction with The Tank Museum. A new app, called Tank 100, is also being released to mark the 100th anniversary of the first battlefield tank deployment. Not only is the app packed with info on tanks from throughout the last 100 years of warfare, tanks will also be appearing in 100 locations up and down the UK. You can find out more by visiting **wargaming.com.**



→ Scan this code to download the Tank 100 app now!



Above The Mark I anniversary is a limited time special event across *World Of Tanks* titles. If you want to get involved on PC, console or mobile you need to jump in from 15 September. After a couple of weeks the special game modes will be gone.



Right The Tank 100 app includes an AR photo mode to let you take pictures of tanks wherever you like. Future content will be coming to the app as other anniversaries land in the coming year.





"I find some of the hardcore ones pretty difficult and I really enjoyed that one"

NICK CHANNON, SENIOR PRODUCER, EA CANADA

WHY I ♥...

STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT

NICK CHANNON
SENIOR PRODUCER, EA CANADA

"The last game I played a lot was Battlefront *and I'm not saying it just because it was an EA game, it was just the last one I played. For me, just being able to play a shooter and feel good in it and actually be able to get up the leader board was great. I find some of the hardcore ones pretty difficult and I really enjoyed that one. Just being immersed in that world, too. That was a game I played a lot. It was excellent."*

Metal Gear Survive

CONCEPT ■ Following the events of *Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes*, soldiers from Motherbase are sucked up into wormholes and left to fend off a zombie-like horde

As if this franchise wasn't mad enough

■ Above: Say what you like about this concept and whether or not it will work, but you can't deny that the Fox Engine still looks great.

Well, that didn't take long. Less than a year since *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* was let loose and we said goodbye to Hideo Kojima's take on the series he started, Konami has revealed a new title in the franchise. A title that is looking to greatly expand and change the way we think about a Metal Gear game while still trying to retain some of the core elements we have come to expect.

Metal Gear Survive is a four-player cooperative survival game that promises to marry the classic stealth gameplay of *MGS V* with online play. Set just after the events of *Ground Zeroes*, as Snake escapes the collapsing Motherbase, you will play as a soldier left behind and suddenly sucked up, along with much of the base and fellow staff members, by wormholes that have appeared in the sky. When you awake you will be on a desert world with large chunks of crashed base around you and the survivors of the incident threatened by a new local menace.

So, what this all boils down to is a four-player co-op zombie survival experience. Not the most ground-breaking concept we've ever seen applied to a long-running franchise. It's about as by-the-numbers as it gets in 2016 and it's easy to be cynical about *Survive*, since Kojima has left and the concepts of mindless zombie hordes and strategic stealth gameplay don't appear to be easy bedfellows. But let's consider the possibility that this could work.

For a start, wormholes in the sky may seem like a bit of a stretch – one seemingly acknowledged by Konami itself, which is describing this as an 'alternate timeline' – but in a world where ghostly possessions, two-legged tanks, cyborg men, women who breathe through their skin, a bee suit, talking to ravens and upgrading your fulton device to one that uses wormholes are possible, wormholes in the sky doesn't seem like the most outlandish stretch. It certainly works as a way of separating this experience from everything else that the Metal Gear series has done before, giving the development team a clean slate to work from conceptually while leaning on established gameplay mechanics and, of course, the ever-impressive Fox Engine.

> "Metal Gear Survive will offer a fresh take on the series' famed stealth elements but within a unique co-op setting that is designed for a truly engrossing multiplayer experience"
>
> TOMOTADA TASHIRO, KONAMI



■ Above: There's a heavy *The Walking Dead* feel to much of *Metal Gear Survive*. The fencing off of a habitable zone and soldiers poking zombies with blades through a fence all feels pretty familiar. We think this will be more of a base of operations though.



BUDGET RELEASE

AN IMPORTANT PIECE of information that was left out from the initial announcement of *Metal Gear Survive* is that it will not be a full priced release from Konami. The publisher didn't give an exact price for the game or an exact release date beyond sometime in 2017, but given that it released *Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes* as a budget title, something along those lines might be expected. Does that in turn mean that *Survive* will be a truncated experience, offering only a few hours of gameplay? We're not sure. It seems possible, but also kind of unlikely. As a co-op survival and exploration experience we imagine that the pricing is more of a concession to *Metal Gear* fans to acknowledge this is something a little outside of traditional *MGS* titles than any admittance that it's a cut-back game.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Konami
Developer: In-house
Release: TBC 2017
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Konami was seemingly stepping back from console game development with the notable exception of the *PES* series, but this move to quickly expand the *Metal Gear* brand following the departure of Hideo Kojima shows that there's still things to come from this development house.

Developer History

Suikoden III **2002 [PS2]**
Castlevania: Harmony Of Despair **2010 [360]**
Zone Of The Enders HD Collection **2012 [PS3, 360]**

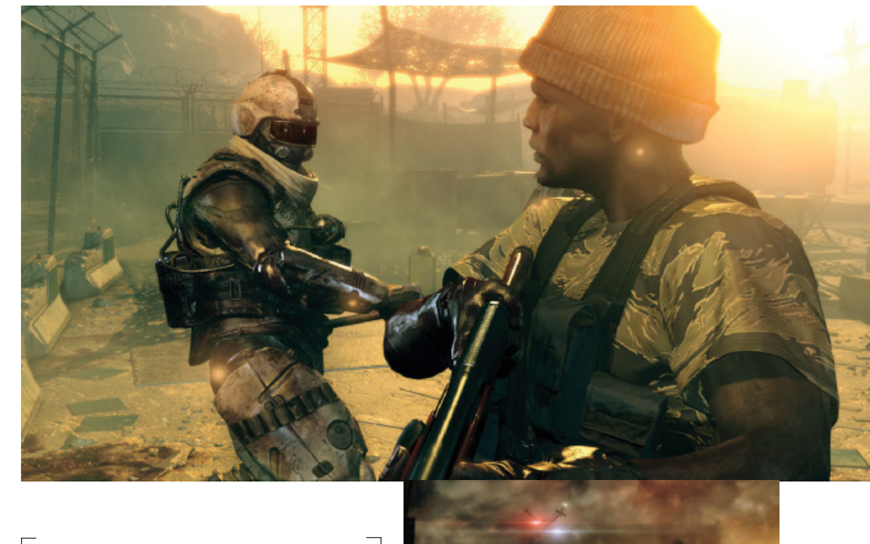
High Point

Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain turned out to be a pretty amazing stealth and open world experience. A fine way for Kojima to bow out from the series, but clearly not the end of the franchise as a whole.

And co-op stealth, while not the most obvious combination, doesn't seem entirely ludicrous. One of our complaints about *The Division* earlier in the year was that it didn't have much stealth to it, which would have been welcome in offering a different tactical approach to taking out enemy bases. All of the groundwork appeared to be there to implement such a mechanic, but it just wasn't there. So, having *Survive* utilise stealth as a means of moving players into position, trapping enemies quietly or offering distractions so other players can move, makes a lot of sense to us.

Using such a mechanic against the threats revealed so far seems slightly less logical. Konami is calling them 'living biological threats', which is one of the worst euphemisms for zombies we've heard in a long time. What we have been shown so far are some rather brainless automatons with crystals in place of their heads acting rather aggressively and waving their arms around a lot. Not something you would think stealth is terribly important against. But then *The Last Of Us* comes to mind as a game that very smartly made a zombie survival experience that relied heavily on hiding and not being found by infected masses. Whether or not the underpowered, fragile state of being in Naughty Dog's game can be translated to a *Metal Gear* setting remains to be seen, but it's not unheard of.

If this were a brand new IP using the Fox Engine, we're not sure we would feel so ill-at-ease with the concept. The Metal Gear branding is the bit that doesn't feel as if it really fits on this project, but publishers will always feel more comfortable using brands they know work than attempt to break out with something new. The name on the box will ultimately mean nothing if the game doesn't deliver something fresh and interesting.



Below: A wormhole sucking up Motherbase seems like a rather strange concept for Konami to pursue, but wormholes were introduced as a viable concept in *The Phantom Pain*, so maybe it's not as much of a stretch as you might think.



Call Of Duty: Infinite Warfare

CONCEPT ■ Call Of Duty takes its battles off of the streets and into the stars in this truly global encounter

A good soldier never gives up

Admit it, you balked at the notion of *Call Of Duty* set in space. You heard that (admittedly awful) cover of David Bowie's *Space Oddity*; saw the action splashed across the stars and thought it was over. It's okay, we were sort of with you on that front, until we saw it in motion that is.

Infinity Ward is retuning to the fold in an attempt to make up for past indiscretions: 2013's *Ghosts* wasn't as warmly received as Activision had hoped and attention from fans has only waned in the face of such strong showings from the *Battlefield* and *Titanfall* franchises. But *Infinite Warfare* deserves your time: it's expansive, innovative and impressive in ways we haven't seen demonstrated from the franchise in some time. That all starts with the campaign – as big and bombastic as ever, though the gameplay looks legitimately fresh too.

The zero-G gun battles are a delight – ignoring the somewhat shaky application of real-world physics, of course – though the real interest comes from the ability to manoeuvre from ground to ship to space in real-time. Battles are no longer locked to the streets, with many missions giving you the opportunity to clamber into your customisable ship, break orbit and continue the fight in the stars – from the cockpit, in zero-G or from the captain's chair of your own battleship. *Infinite Warfare* is going to be big, it shouldn't be missed.

HUGE SCALE

■ THE PATH THROUGH *Call Of Duty* has always been fairly linear – you get an order barked at you, you follow along implicitly and get the job done. Not so in *Infinite Warfare*. Not only are you leading the charge – with a huge army behind you – but also there's the opportunity to tackle side-quests from the giant battle cruiser you command. This will reveal new combat intel, weapons and items down the line.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: Activision
Developer: Infinity Ward
Release: 4 November 2016
Players: TBC

Developer Profile

Founded in 2002, Infinity Ward was brought in to develop a rival to *Medal Of Honor* for Activision – by the very developers that were building it for EA. This core team would go on to reinvent the shooter time and time again, before many of the core team left the studio in 2010 to start Respawn Games and create *Titanfall*.

High Point

Modern Warfare didn't just change the modern FPS, it reinvented it. Multiplayer and single-player shooters were never the same again; the introduction of a tactile MP progression system is probably its greatest gift to gamers though.

Developer History

Call Of Duty 2003 [PC]
Call Of Duty 2 2005 [Xbox 360, PC]
Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare [2007]
Call Of Duty: Ghosts [2009]



"Guy Ritchie is a friend of the franchise, so it was great to have him back to work with us, assisting in bringing Kit Harington's character to life in Infinite Warfare"

DAVE STOHL INFINITY WARD

STAR TALENT

INFINITE WARFARE WILL make use of star talent to help bring a cinematic flair to its single-player campaign, though Activision is really going all out this time. Not only is *Game Of Thrones*'s Kit Harington (Jon Snow) "portraying the face of the enemy" but it sounds as if he is being directed by *Lock Stock…* director Guy Ritchie, who has been brought in "assisting in bringing Kit Harington's character to life."

COMBAT EVOLVED

CALL OF DUTY has always stuck fairly rigidly to a three-lane design: it's a classic FPS formula that works wonders in both campaign and multiplayer. But with sprawling levels set out in space – with nothing but a booster-pack and grappling hook separating you from a long, cold sleep – the levels have become noticeably more interesting. The opportunity to find interesting uses of the environment and experiment with cover (and gravity itself) brings new gameplay possibilities to *Call Of Duty* that we've never seen before.



The Last Guardian

CONCEPT ■ A young boy and a large, curious creature must team up to escape a compound they have both found themselves prisoners in

We're in this together

We're not sure that *The Last Guardian* is going to be changing anyone's life when it finally lands later this year. We point this out only to stamp down any cumulative expectations you might have about this game, not to denigrate it. Nearly ten years in gestation has meant Fumito Ueda's follow-up to Ico and *Shadow Of The Colossus* has gathered up and retained a lot of high hopes. In the end its greatest sin may be simply that it's a game after all.

So, if we can put aside hype and overblown expectation for a moment and look at *The Last Guardian* with as little baggage as possible, what do we have? A relatively small, contained and potentially beguiling tale of a young boy and large creature hoping to work together, despite a communication barrier, to find freedom. And that's never really changed after all these years. Here are some other key points you need to keep in mind.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Sony Interactive Entertainment
Developer: genDesign, SIE Japan Studio
Release: 28 October 2016
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Fumito Ueda and several other members of Japan Studio left Sony back in 2014 to form genDesign, but work continued on *The Last Guardian* in collaboration with their old team. While it already has some ideas on other projects, they are said to be on hold until this game is finally completed.

Developer History

Enemy Zero **1997 [Saturn]**
Ico **2001 [PS2]**
Shadow Of The Colossus **2005 [PS2]**

High Point

Shadow Of The Colossus's influence on boss design in the early years was immediate, but as the years have gone by its storytelling techniques have probably lasted the longest.

1 IT'S NOT ABOUT LOOKS

UEDA HAS BEEN stressing that the genDesign and Japan Studio teams are not looking to push the PS4 hardware all that hard. Graphical excellence is important, but generation-defining visuals are not the primary concern of the team. It has been investing its time in animating Trico and the boy and working on facial animations to make sure you can read as much from Trico's face as possible. Some have compared *The Last Guardian* favourably with the PS4 version of *The Last Of Us*. So, nice to look at, but more stylised than realistic.



3



4



5

"I'm always looking at ways to convey human emotion with technology but at the moment I thought a great way to achieve a range of emotions and expressions was via an animal"

FUMITO UEDA GENDESIGN

2 FAMILY TIES

AS YOU MIGHT expect, there are plenty of connections between this game and Ueda's previous titles. Small visual elements, like the black dust-like clouds of *Ico* and *Shadow Of The Colossus* appearing around Trico at times, make an appearance. There's also some of the style of the game with its misty draw distances and subtle animations. The boy will stumble on uneven ground and sometimes lose his footing. He's not a seasoned or experienced climber or anything, so he makes mistakes, just as we've seen in the PS2 titles.

3 NOT ALL SILENT

WHILE YOU'LL SPEND most of the game not being able to communicate with Trico verbally, *The Last Guardian* will begin with a voice-over from the boy when he is much older, tipping the game's hat a little as to his ultimate fate. This means for the first time in a Team Ico game, there will be specifically stated narrative upon which to build some of your own theories. As we understand it, this won't be through the whole game, so there will still be plenty of room for you to provide your own conclusions.

4 THERE'S MORE TO TRICO THAN YOU KNOW

SO FAR OUR exposure to Trico has shown it to be a very individualistic and self-motivated creature. You can't treat it as a pet or really order it around when you first start working together, and it may even strike out at you. Early gameplay demos have revealed that there is hidden power beneath Trico's adorable exterior. For instance, you can use mirrors to cause a beam of energy to fire from its tail. Is this some kind of response that Trico has been trained to follow and what does it mean for the trust between the two characters?

5 TRICO IS NOT ALONE

UP UNTIL FAIRLY recently we had assumed Trico might be the last of its kind or in some way separated from others in its species, however, new images suggest otherwise. The appearance of a second creature with its eyes glowing in anger (something Trico does too) gives more weight to the idea that these animals may be used as weapons, trained to destroy an unknown enemy. Very little has been said about this so far by the team, so we will have to wait for the game to discover more.



"Sonic Mania brings fans back into the 2D world of platform games with nostalgic pixel-style art and core classic gameplay"
PRESS RELEASE SEGA



Above: While *Sonic Mania* will include new stages, it will also reimagine some of the most popular zones from previous Sonic games.

Sonic Mania

CONCEPT ■ Forget the last 20 years of Sonic and prepare for an old-school adventure as Sega finally listens to fan demands and delivers the Sonic game the Sega Saturn never received.

This has been a long time coming

What would have happened to Sonic had Sega actually listened to its fans back in the Nineties? Would Sonic still be forced to spend his spare time playing beach volleyball with a pair of out-of-work Italian plumbers in a desperate attempt to stay relevant, or would he be ruling the generation divide with his famous combination of speed and tenacity? *What if* Sega didn't waste its golden years pissing about with spin-off titles and resoundingly terrible 3D adventures; with werehogs and gun-toting hedgehogs? That's the question that has haunted Sega purists through the decades, disappointment fuelled by a simple question - *what if?*

The concept behind *Sonic Mania* is simple enough then. It is looking to answer the lingering question: what if Sega had designed a 2D *Sonic* for the Sega Saturn? The answer, by all accounts, is that it would have been pretty great. *Mania* is a passion project built by fans for the fans, an ode to the majesty and momentum of the old sprite-based Sonic games that ruled the Genesis era.

When we tell you that it is built by fans, we aren't kidding either. Sega is developing *Mania* in collaboration with Christian Whitehead, a homebrew programmer whose Sonic ports were so good that Sega handed him the keys to the Emerald kingdom. But Whitehead isn't just gingerly dipping his toes into the pools of retro-nostalgia, he is drowning himself in it – *Mania* is everything *Sonic 4* should have been and more.

It's a pixel-fuelled explosion of everything you used to love about Sonic: perfectly placed platforms, blistering pace and thunderous stage music that sounds like it's being generated from a heavily modified Genesis console. There's nothing progressive about Sega's approach to game design here, but once you hear that opening Green Hill Zone crescendo kick into action and see Sonic standing there, tapping his foot in anticipation as you marvel at the 32-bit backgrounds, you'll find little to complain about.

Mania is Sega's gambit, to see whether Sonic fans are willing to put their money where their mouths have been for 20 years. It draws heavily from the original trilogy, with a smattering of *Sonic & Knuckles* thrown in – but what's important is the sense of speed. Sonic has momentum again; the platforming seems tight and intuitive, while the introduction of a new drop-dash move looks to abolish the slower moments of levels.

Sega is doing everything right here. It feels like we've said that before only to be burned, but *Mania* is energised with passion. It's simultaneously a wonderful homage and a call to arms, a promise that Sonic can run his way back to the top. Forget *Sonic 4*, *Mania* is emerging as the true successor to the Sonic-Genesis legacy.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Headcannon, PagodaWest Games
Release: Q1 2017
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Known in professional circles as The Taxman, Christian Whitehead is an independent game developer out of Melbourne, Australia who made a name for himself as a homebrew developer that created his own game engine – Retro Engine – and used it to create authentic Sonic games, which ultimately landed him a job with Sega.

Developer History

Retro Sonic **2008 [PC]**
Sonic The Hedgehog CD **2013 [Multi]**
Sonic The Hedgehog **2013 [iOS]**
Sonic The Hedgehog 2 **2013 [iOS]**

High Point

Whitehead's Retro Engine has been a big hit in the retro scene, though it was best used to successfully port the first two *Sonic The Hedgehog* games to iOS, with Whitehead behind the re-releases.



Above: As great as it'll be to play as Sonic in an all-new frantic adventure, *Mania* will also include two other playable characters, the ever popular Tails and Knuckles.




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Sid Meier's Civilization VI

CONCEPT ■ The latest in the acclaimed series of human progress simulations is, unsurprisingly, the most feature-packed and complex yet, with more of an emphasis on making every session feel different to the last.

Everybody wants to rule the world

No pressure or anything, but *Civilization VI* sort of has to be really good. Many fans who played *Beyond Earth* found it didn't scratch the same itch as the mainline games – with the comfort blanket of familiarity whisked away and retooled and re-branded systems, currencies and menus, the spin-off felt decidedly alien. But going back to one of the main games (despite countless refinements and improvements, mainline entries have changed little mechanically) after seeing the wealth of fresh ideas and approaches present in Meier's brave new world wasn't all that easy, putting the franchise in a tricky place. Fans want familiarity *and* innovation, for a new game to tick all the same boxes as those that have come before, but to do so in a different way. The extent to which that's true of *Civilization VI* likely won't become clear until closer to launch, but it's clear to see even this early that Firaxis' new vision for an unstacked *Civilization* will offer something a little bit different, while still looking and feeling very much like fans would expect.

The most obvious change is the way cities sprawl across their entire catchment area, rather than being packed into single tiles previously. This is more than just cosmetic, too – buildings and facilities must now be actively placed, taking into account remaining space, positioning and nearby resources and commodities, plus it makes it easy to analyse cities at a glance, strengths, weaknesses, priorities and vulnerabilities all laid out in simple visual form. When planning an attack on a large settlement, for instance, an assault on the opposite side of town to the military district will likely buy you a few turns before reinforcements can be mobilised, especially since units can't be stacked. It also means you actually have to think about what you build – plonking down a great big Wonder in your capital might seem like a good idea but since it's likely to leave less space for development around it, you really have to weigh up the benefits and consider location when starting work on any marvel of the modern age. There's nowhere near enough room to build them all in one city anyway, serving as a gentle nudge towards spreading out a little more and founding additional towns and cities to house all your glorious creations.

Less apparent is the overhaul of the religion system, which looks pretty similar at a glance but now runs far deeper. Devout followers of any given faith can spread the word peacefully or do so aggressively, the latter leading to the likes of holy wars and crusades in the name of your one true religion. It even serves as a victory condition now, although it's not yet clear what the milestone is that you'll need to reach in order to achieve that. A percentage adoption rate for your faith of choice among other factions seems most likely, meaning this will probably play out like a hybrid of going for Domination and Cultural victories at once. Science victory is the fourth win condition, and it looks like Diplomatic victories are no more – it's especially likely considering that we already know the World Congress feature (added in *Civ V* expansion *Brave New World*) it leaned on so heavily is also gone.

The major push here is towards making every scenario and session feel unique, with many of the changes feeding directly into this. Factions have more unique units and extra perks that push them towards certain styles of approach; tech trees have 'Eureka' moments attached to mini-objectives and goals that reward certain feats with research bonuses; civics act almost like a second tech tree, woven around the core one to reward specialisation in certain fields. This shift terrifies us as much as it delights us – more variety is never a bad thing but given how easy it is to lose days to a Civilization game already, the prospect of having this feel truly different on every play means we're unlikely to see the outside world for quite some time come October.

> "The visual presentation of the game is inspired by the maps and tools of the Age of Exploration, and we've made several key gameplay changes such as expansive cities and active research that makes Sid Meier's Civilization VI an entirely unique experience"
>
> ED BEACH FIRAXIS

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: 2K Games
Developer: Firaxis
Release: 21 October 2016
Players: 1-8

Developer Profile

Sid Meier's name is one synonymous with quality and innovation in the field of strategy gaming. After cutting his teeth on flight sims, Meier's star turn came around in the early Nineties, with *Civilization* presenting cultural strategy on a global scale and *Colonization* refining the format with a laser focus trained on colonial America.

Developer History

Chopper Rescue **1982 [Multi]**
Sid Meier's Civilization II **1996 [Multi]**
Sid Meier's Pirates! **2004 [Multi]**
Sid Meier's Civilization: Beyond Earth **2014 [PC]**

High Point

It's almost too tight to call and personal preference plays a big part too, but *Civ V*'s bevy of features and refinements – especially with the expansions – makes it a damn fine contender, although there's a fair chance *VI* could stake a claim on the throne very shortly.





■ Above: Cities now fill their entire tile allocation, with smart placement of districts and facilities offering a new layer of micromanagement.







■ Above: And where are they now, the little people of Stonehenge? And what would they say to us if they were here, tonight? Below: The Great Wall is no longer a Wonder, rather a unique upgrade for China. There are many more bespoke units and perks for each faction than ever before – an effort to make each feel and play less like the others.

WORK IN PROGRESS

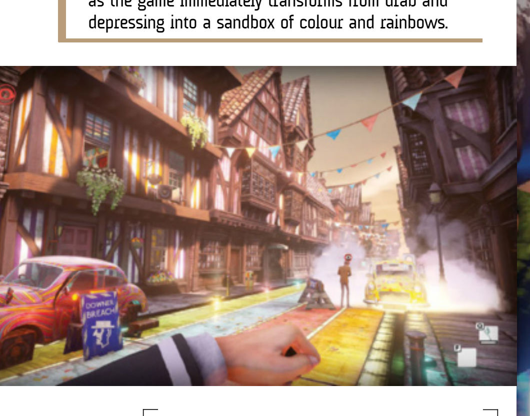
Wonders have always been an integral part of the Civilization experience, with the race to see which factions can complete theirs first often establishing a pecking order for the endgame. Even more is being made of these world-famous landmarks this time out, to the point that progress towards completion is actually visible on the structure itself. Not only does this offer a huge sense of satisfaction – to see something like the Hanging Gardens or Eiffel Tower gradually take shape in your city is amazing – but it also lets you keep track of the progress of opponents and allies' Wonder construction in a simple, visual way. Even though Wonders can't be destroyed directly, laying siege to a city that is stepping to your toes by trying to create the same landmark should certainly halt production long enough for you to complete the project first.

Below: *We Happy Few* is an open-world survival game at heart, set in a procedurally generated world. That's worth noting, because the game also encourages perma-death, meaning every attempt you make to escape will offer a fresh new experience.



DRUGS ARE BAD, KIDS

WE HAPPY FEW seems like a game that has a lot to say about drugs and addiction, but it isn't aiming to be a big commentary on the pitfalls of mind-altering hallucinogenics. There are some sections of the game where you'll need to pop Joy pills to alter your state of mind and appearance, if the citizens catch wind that you're a Downer – off the drugs – they will alert the police to your condition and a game of cat and mouse will begin as you attempt to escape detainment. Popping them has proven to be quite amusing though, as the game immediately transforms from drab and depressing into a sandbox of colour and rainbows.





Above: Early Access hasn't been the best fit for *We Happy Few*, with its content-lite release making it very difficult to judge what the game is aspiring to do – or even how on track development is. Until more content gets added you should stay away.



We Happy Few



CONCEPT ■ The government is suppressing the people of one sleepy British town with a mind-altering drug called Joy. You play as the Downer, a man desperately trying to escape the town after weaning himself off of the drug.

The problem with Early Access

There's a reason most videogames are developed behind a wall of secrecy; iron gates flanked by an army of PR executives and hand-binding non-disclosure agreements. Development – especially in the independent scene – is aggressively iterative, as a small team builds and tweaks a concept until it's ready to reveal it to the world in a blistering haze of press releases and Let's Play videos. But when a developer invites players to peak behind the curtain for a price, there's potential for disappointment, the feeling of betrayal even. That's the inherent problem with gaming in Early Access; unfinished products are often but shadows of their full potential.

The developer relies on its audience to understand what its game is – or what it is supposed to be, at least – and asks them to pay for the privilege of assisting with QA testing. If it's clear what a game is building towards, there's usually a level of acceptance to the practice. If, on the other hand, players pay into something that they weren't expecting, well then some serious issues begin to present themselves.

Take *We Happy Few*. It quickly drew a cult following from its early showing; trailers and gameplay demos that suggested a claustrophobic narrative-led adventure in the same vein as *BioShock* – albeit one caught in an terrifying alternate-history of Sixties England, all hallucinogenic drug trips and buoyant British accents. Its opening chapter echoes a level of *Half-Life* channelling the crazed work of Stanley Kubrick – a satirical and poignant slice of life cut from the same cloth as *The Stanley Parable*.

It's an opening level that's energetic, stylised and remarkably memorable. Imagine our surprise then, to discover that the game beyond these ten minutes – from what we can gauge from the Game Preview in its current state – is actually rather unremarkable. *We Happy Few* is *not* a claustrophobic crawl through a twisted Orwellian state, but an open world survival game. More *The Long Dark* than *BioShock* or *Half-Life*; the shift between the establishing level and the game that follows is jarring, to say the least.

We've long been aware of the premise: Arthur Hastings abstains from indulging in mood-altering drug – called 'Joy' – and makes a desperate attempt to escape a hidden regime, propelled through a procedurally generated world by the constant fear that getting caught is truly the end (perma-death reigns supreme). What we weren't expecting is flat, drab environments and unresponsive *Elder Scrolls*-style combat; simple item crafting and more resource bars than we know how to appropriately balance.

To Compulsion Games' credit, the team makes it clear upon boot up that only 50 per cent of the overall content and playable character storylines have been added to the game so far, but we can't help but feel as if we're receiving a different game than the marketing had promised in the first place. Even if that content were in the game now, would it even make a difference? More narrative led content could certainly help tie it all together, though *We Happy Few* ultimately feels conflicted between its concept and its execution; the gameplay is pretty unsatisfying in its current state.

Don't get us wrong, we love a good open-world survival game, but the systems and mechanics Compulsion Games has built aren't meshing well enough with the world. It's promising a mind-bending narrative in a procedural first-person sandbox, but Early Access is but a bare-bones rendition of either concept. The quests need more structure, the AI needs an overhaul – as do the crafting and combat systems.

Can *We Happy Few* become the expanding storybook that we expected it to be? To take its wickedly cool concept and mesh it with a procedurally generation hellscape of drug abuse and demanding quest lines? Perhaps, but by putting *We Happy Few* into the wild so early – in such a rough and ready state – there's a chance the final experience could be hampered by your first steps through it. Basically, *We Happy Few* is a game that needs to be experienced in its final form, content-complete and polished as all hell. Entering into Game Preview/Early Access feels like a mistake, though what the ramifications of this will be won't be certain until the full game releases in early 2017.

> "To find your way out of Wellington Wells and reconstruct the past, you'll have to blend in with its citizens, who don't take kindly to those who don't abide by their not-so-normal rules."

COMPULSION GAMES PRESS RELEASE

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PC
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Compulsion Games
Developer: In-house
Release: TBC 2017
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Compulsion Games is a small studio in a big industry. Comprised of just 20 developers, the studio was founded in 2009 with a focus on making artistic and creative games. Its output has been small and steady, though *We Happy Few* is its biggest game yet.

Developer History

Contrast **2013 [Multi]**

High Point

Contrast was a strong debut for Compulsion Games in 2013, a quirky platformer in which you shift between the 3D world and that of your shadow in 2D. It is an interesting adventure combined with a gorgeous film noir aesthetic to boot.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON


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SYSTEM SHOCK

Format: **PC, PS4, Xbox One**
Publisher: **Nightdive Studios**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **December 2017**

1 A PC demo for this HD remake of *System Shock* is already available to play and it's every bit as creepy as we remember. As sci-fi horror goes, *System Shock* was an intense experience and this new version has managed to update every facet of the visuals without losing any of the tension. It's no great surprise that the spirit of the game should remain intact since Nightdive also made the enhanced edition of *System Shock* in 2015, remastering its original graphics. The reboot, built with Unity, is still some way off from a full release, and the controls could do with some tightening up, but it's got the looks.

HOUSE OF THE DYING SUN

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Marauder Interactive**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC 2016**

2 There are elements to this space shooter that makes it something exceptional. The combat looks intense, just the way interstellar battle should; it has the feel of a *Battlestar Galactica* game with deep drum beats and heavily muted space audio; it's made by one person, Mike Tipul, a former Bungie developer. Throw in VR compatibility and you have all the makings of a very interesting game. It may carry some of the same traits as other space-set games, but this looks entirely like its own beast as you hunt down the traitors who killed your emperor. *House Of The Dying Sun* is a more focused take on the space shooter genre.

BEAT COP

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **11 Bit Studios**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC 2016**

3 Having had a chance to play a little of *Beat Cop* we're even more intrigued with its setup and design. It's a great mixture of adventure game, simulation and mystery in one. You can stand around on the streets solving the main mystery of who set you up and has killed a street cop in cold blood or you can serve your mandated hours and fill in your ticket quotas. Success means trying to do a little of both, but will you get it all done in time? Inspecting cars and handing out tickets alone is fraught with dangers as angry motorists confront you. The mixture of the mundane, satirical and dark is very nicely done in what we've seen so far.

BLOCK'HOOD

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Devolver Digital**
Developer: **Plethora-Project**
ETA: **TBC 2016**

4 Taking its cues from the likes of *Sim City* and *Cities: Skylines*, *Block'Hood* describes itself as a neighbourhood builder rather than a city builder. The playing area is far more condensed, but that just forces you to build upwards in order to form an ecologically sound new habitat. As you work up you can add more and more resources and technologies to your small community, expanding its potential, but also having to balance it in small increments, too. The minimalist aesthetic of the whole game gives it a slightly sterile, laboratory feel. It simply adds to the sense you're building your own miniature civilisation.

FOR THE KING

Format: **PC, Xbox One**
Publisher: **IronOak Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC 2016**

5 Having started out as an attempt to combine tabletop gameplay with a digital RPG model for a hybrid board game, *For The King* has emerged as a smart mixture of turn-based RPG and roguelike that allows for co-op play with friends, just as a tabletop game would. Procedural generation of the game map, a 24-hour-cycle and weather also combine to mean that each playthrough and the enemy types you encounter will keep changing. That should mean it will be just as enjoyable and varied with each new campaign, perhaps even allowing you to set up multiple adventures with friends, each with their own style and approach.



We catch up with Arkane Studios and find out how a new generation, new engine and new hero are helping it to make the stealth action game it always dreamed about

NORED 2™

Sometimes you have to wait for technology to catch up with your vision. That's typically a maxim used in the movie industry, but occasionally it has come up in gaming. Only, games have usually seen vision driven by tech and not the other way around. For *Dishonored*, however, there were signs that Arkane had a vision for the new world it was creating and as gloriously brutal and grizzled as it was, it wasn't quite where it wanted to be. The great advantage that a new generation of consoles and more powerful PCs has given the Lyon-based studio is that it now has the power it needs to fully express itself.

This was a process that began almost immediately after the critical and commercial success of the original game in 2012 as the team looked to deliver DLC.

"We are really passionate about creating and crafting stuff so this was more of an opportunity than a challenge," Arkane Studios art director Sébastien Mitton tells us as we discuss the process of moving into a new generation. "You know, it is always good when you have success with a game. We had success with *Dishonored 1* and people were really enjoying the art style. Now, moving from one generation to another and crafting our own engine, it's like the stars are aligning and we said 'let's go'. That's why we have raised the bar in terms of details, quality, scope; it's much larger, and we have more characters. There's a new city: we start in Dunwall, visit Karnaca and then we go back to Dunwall. It was four years of patience. People always ask how long the production is and it's always tough in the beginning and intense at the end, but we always react to feedback. That's the way that we work. We say yes to the player and we try to do our best."

Many developers speak about listening to the fans and giving the fans what they want, but often it's just lip service. Not so with Arkane. When this team talks about listening to feedback and giving players what they want, it comes from an earnest place. *Dishonored* was a game that attempted to marry pretty complex systems with a very particular art style and that's something that could have produced a very niche product. As it is, Arkane managed to tap into something with broad appeal and it doesn't want to let that slip.

You can see from the DLC stories of *The Knife Of Dunwall* and *The Brigmore Witches* that Arkane has grown more and more confident in its own world as time has passed. It has also grown more confident in how it builds its systems, allowing more and more room for players to express themselves and find emergent ways of handling a mission; »

something that delighted players of the original game and only looks to be expanding with *Dishonored 2*.

"It's a lot more work for us," admits creative director Harvey Smith. "The level design has to support it; the game mechanics have to support it. But there are tricks for all of that. We've been working on this type of game for a long time, so we understand the tricks."

The tricks that Smith speaks of are all about giving the game the information it needs to handle just about any combination of approaches the player can think of; linking together abilities, AI and the environment into one coherent ecosystem. That's a task made even more complex by the kind of missions and locations Arkane has added to *Dishonored 2*, best exemplified by the Clockwork Mansion mission we recently got to see in action.

"When we made the announcement trailer we showed a CG render of the Clockwork Mansion, going to kill Kirin Jindosh, but it was not in-engine," explains Smith. "It was very early in our development. Now, here you can see the Clockwork Mansion running in the Void engine and we think it looks fantastic. All of that is in the player's hands; you can throw levers to reconfigure the rooms based on what you want. If you want to reconfigure the rooms to get access to another path, you can. If you want to trap a Clockwork Soldier in another part of the house you can reconfigure the room so that the walls close and it's trapped. You use this dynamically for gameplay; it's not scripted."

Watching the Mansion in action is a sight to behold. It's reminiscent of sequences from *Portal* where test chambers would begin changing and shifting before your eyes as new walls, floors and objects would be lifted into place. Except this building can be changed and moulded by your decisions, opening up corridors, but also opening up gaps behind the walls you might want to slip into. Arkane is not just delivering a repeat of the original *Dishonored*, but a retooled, more confident take on the concept. Watching Emily Kaldwin (daughter of Corvo Attano and possible player character should you choose to play the game as her) navigate this location is quite incredible as she combines her Far Reach and Shadow Walk abilities to slip in and out of cover, around the machinery of the Mansion, with incredible speed and ease.

The Clockwork Mansion is also a fine example of a tonal shift between the two games with its plush, rich feel standing in contrast to what felt like a bleaker, darker Dunwall. "It's funny people remember Dunwall as so bleak, because parts of Karnaca are really bleak too," insists Smith. "The game happens in the middle of a coup and Emily's lost the throne and either Emily or Corvo are on the run trying to set things right. But also, in Serkonos [the island of which Karnaca is the capital], the Duke of Serkonos has crushed the cities and he's a tyrant and so the guards are making up rules on the spot, they're having firing squads, they're making up taxes - it's a pretty bleak situation."

So, despite Emily Kaldwin ascending to the throne and taking her late mother's place, all is still not well in the empire. This trip to Karnaca is a fantastic chance to take a look at the wider Empire of the Isles and what life is like beyond Dunwall, as well as seeing where Corvo Attano, the protagonist from the original game, grew up. Arkane decided to head to the southern isles to offer a different view of the world it had created. "We wanted more colour in the palette, but you know if you go look at The Golden Cat [from the House Of Pleasure mission in *Dishonored*], there are some beautiful, colourful levels in *Dishonored 1*," Smith continues. "But the sun is often visible in Karnaca and people are fishing on the piers. It's still that kind of semi-Mediterranean City."

1852 Spain and the Antilles, Cuba and parts of Italy have all been sighted as influences on the look and feel of Karnaca.

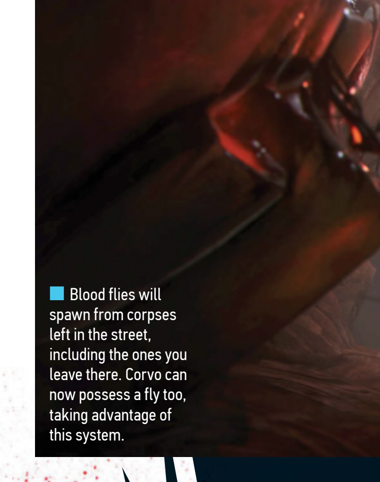
And as Smith says, while there is more sunshine and brightly-coloured buildings might be a little more common, there is no less emotional, political and social darkness in *Dishonored 2* than before. If anything the suffering and torment of this town is only thrown into greater contrast. The Dust District for instance, which was the subject of Arkane's first gameplay reveal, showed a small area of Karnaca having to deal daily with hardships. The way that wooden wind breakers lined the streets to protect people's homes and businesses is the kind of smaller detail that Arkane has proven itself very good at providing, offering background on the history of this world without having to say a word. The same can be said of people's clothing, faces and bodies. Every character feels like it has lived a life before you meet them on a dusty road.

The other element of *Dishonored* that moving to Karnaca has helped to bring into greater relief is how it approaches stealth with regards to lighting and shadow very differently to other games of this genre.

"One of the things about *Dishonored* is that lighting only plays a part in the stealth calculations at a distance," says Smith. "Up close we assume that you can see me, like if I step out in front of you in a dim alley, you see me. It's not like I'm standing on a black tile or a white tile and you don't see me or you do see me. We're not that kind of game. We assume up close that people can see pretty well. At a distance darkness begins to matter more and more."

It's something you will have noticed a fair amount in *Dishonored* working your way through the prison and sewers at the start of the game as the darker regions offered little protection from the prying eyes of the guards. Cover is what it's all about, but Smith revealed there are other ways of affecting enemy lines of sight to your advantage. "What is actually a game mechanic exclusive that we've never actually talked about outside of the team, when you shoot a guard in the helmet, the bullet bounces off, but the helmet comes off. So, the helmet is protecting their head, but a by-product of that, which we didn't anticipate initially, is that it has a visor and that breaks the view cones and they see even less well above than when they're wearing a hat. So this is an interesting gameplay mechanic."

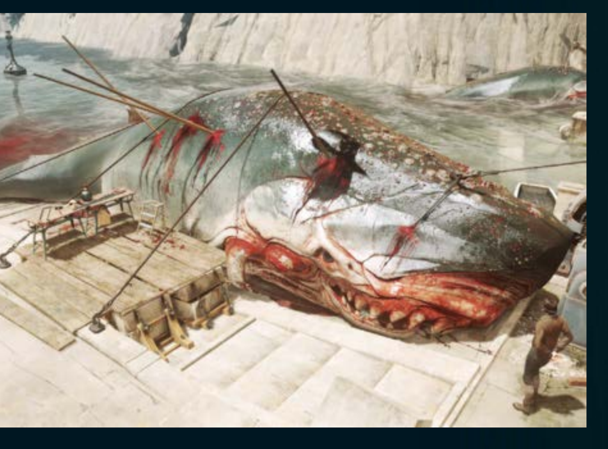
Arkane's whole approach to stealth gameplay has been incredibly refreshing, doing away with stale gaming logic and replacing it with something more realistic and interesting. *Dishonored 2* only appears to be taking this to new heights thanks to some of the locations and missions it will send you on. As impressive as the Clockwork Mansion is, the time-bending experience of A Crack In The Slab promises to be even more »



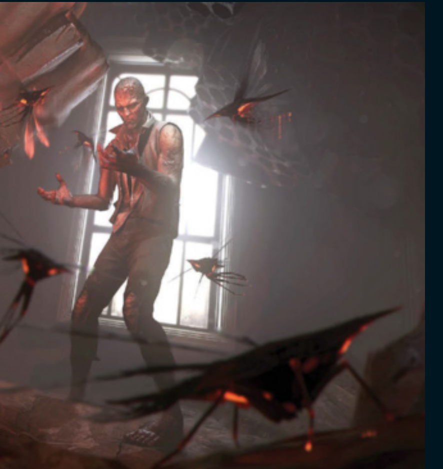
Blood flies will spawn from corpses left in the street, including the ones you leave there. Corvo can now possess a fly too, taking advantage of this system.



Different guards and enemies will actually carry different Chaos values this time around. Using the mysterious Heart from the original game you can hear about their lives and behaviours. If they are despicable, violent people it will be lower Chaos to kill them than more innocent or well-meaning characters.



Arkane is not just delivering a repeat of the original Dishonored, but a retooled, more confident take on the concept



How Dishonored stacks up

HARVEY SMITH TELLS US A LITTLE ABOUT HOW THE NEW POWERS ALLOW FOR INTERESTING STACKING AND INTERMINGLING OF ABILITIES

One of the great things about the supernatural abilities of Corvo Attano in *Dishonored* was how you could combine them to great effect and that's something that Arkane has worked hard to maintain and embellish with *Dishonored 2*. We asked creative director Harvey Smith to talk us through some examples of this.

"When we first put Domino in the game, it's crazy the way you can combine it," he explains of one of Emily Kaldwin's powers. "For instance, you're low health and you're in a desperate situation, you're hiding under a desk and there are three very powerful enemies approaching you. Let's say one is an Elite Guard and she has a pistol on her belt and there are two guards with her or it's three overseers or something and you don't want to fight those guys, but there's a servant over there and he's putting food on a tray and you Domino those three together with the servant. Then you just kill the servant, who barely fights. You can kill the servant very easily, so immediately when you cut the servant's head off all three of them die and you've not risked yourself."

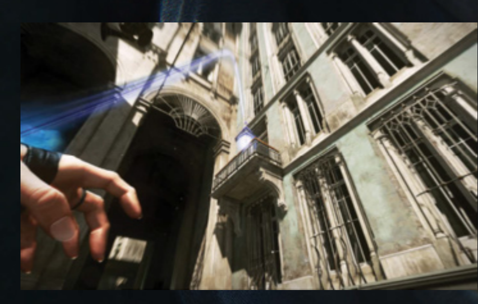
For Corvo, the new upgrades to his abilities open up new options too. "With Devouring Swarm you could summon a swarm of rats, but now you can summon two swarms or a swarm that can follow you or a larger swarm or all of those, doubling down on Devouring Swarm and be the 'rat guy'. And then you can take possession and summon some rats to fight for you and possess one and run around with it. You can run along a rat tunnel as an alternate way to get into some place, so you can combine a rat swarm and Possession. Take all the upgrades from both of those, Possession now lets you possess sleeping people or corpses, it allows you to transfer from host to host, so if I'm in one guy who passes another guy I can jump to that guy. You can possess a blood fly and fly or a fish and swim, so you can really go deep on the powers and the level design has to support that and feel balanced."



This steamboat, the Dreadful Wale, is your home and base of operations for *Dishonored 2*. This is where you'll return to after missions and meet with the captain Meagan Foster, voiced by Rosario Dawson.

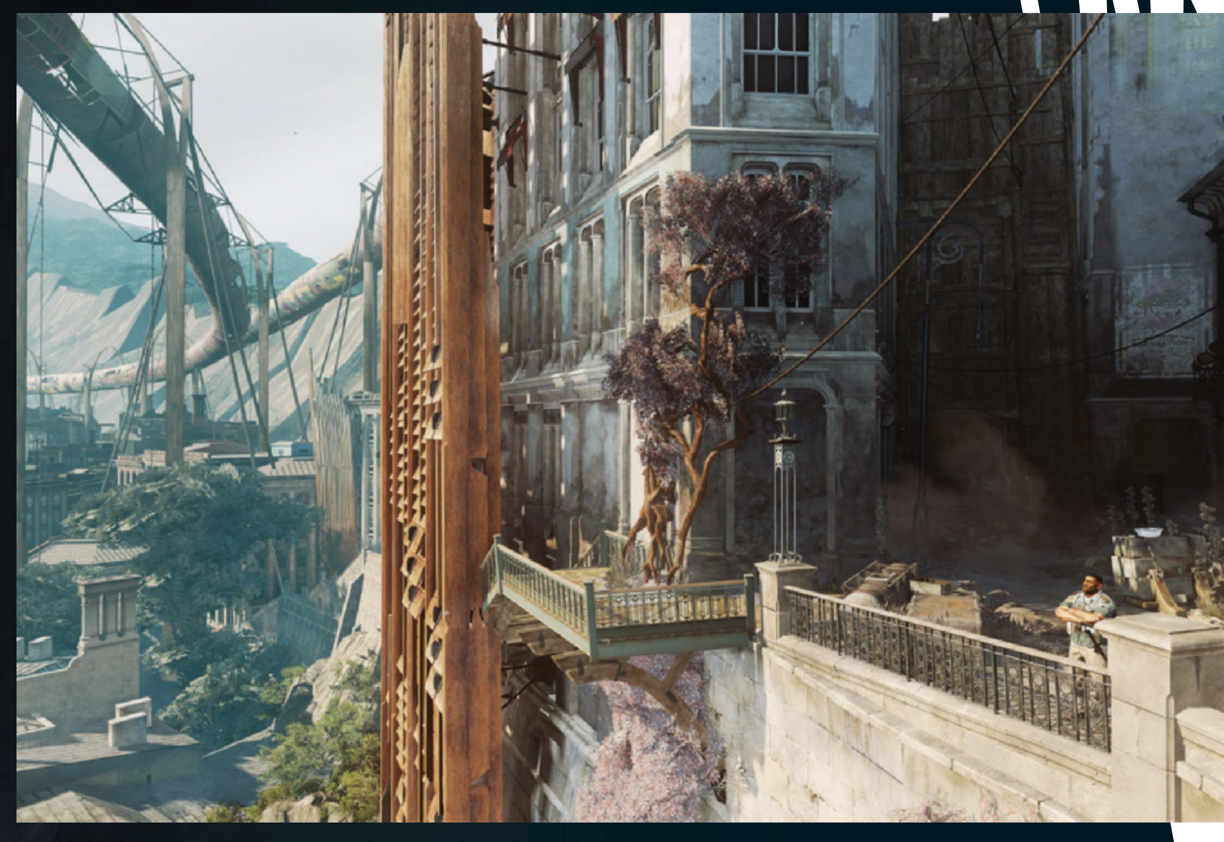


The Clockwork Mansion is defended by its own Clockwork Soldiers, who can take a bit of destroying. Once you remove their heads they remain operational, but can only hear you, not see you. We doubt killing them affects your Chaos either.



Emily's Far Reach ability creates this beam of light to see what you will be grabbing onto. Make sure it's something secured down if you want to move otherwise you'll be pulling it towards yourself.

Arkane built on the id Tech 5 engine used in the original game to create its own Void engine for this sequel and the results are pretty spectacular.



The impressive Empress

TAKING A CLOSER LOOK AT DISHONORED 2'S NEW PROTAGONIST

FULL NAME: Emily Drexel Lela Kaldwin
BIRTHDATE: 2nd Day, Month of Rain, 1827
BIRTHPLACE: Dunwall, Gristol
EYE COLOR: Dark brown
HEIGHT: 5'10"

Dark Vision:
Allows Emily to see guards and other enemies through walls.

Mesmerize:
Emily creates a surreal object in the air that will capture the interest of enemies, allowing you to slip by unnoticed.

Domino:
Chains enemies together so that the fate of one affects the others. Starts with just two characters, but can be upgraded to more.

Far Reach:
Similar to Corvo's Blink, but can be seen while moving and requires Emily to attach to a physical object in the world. It can also be used to pull things towards her.

Doppelganger:
Creates a copy of Emily to distract enemies. Can be upgraded to fight on your behalf.

Shadow Walk:
Emily turns into a living shadow, allowing for stealthy movement and access to smaller routes.

Other details

Mark of the Outsider:
Just like her father, Emily carries the mark of the Outsider. It's not clear yet how she receives the mark, but the Outsider is likely to be the reason why she got her powers.

Folding blade:
Emily can be seen using the same folding blade as Corvo Attano did in the original *Dishonored*.

incredible. As you move between past and present, using each to help navigate the other, it's entirely different kind of stealth gaming. We asked Smith to talk us through how it was conceived.

"It was a group effort and I have to say that Christophe [Carrier, level design director] and Joackim [Daviaud, lead level designer] did a lot of the initial thinking about it and it's cool because we pushed further and further on the architecture front so that the past and the present look very different. One has music, candles, a warmth, there's food on the table, there are guards walking around grumbling. It's three years in our past. It's before the events of *Dishonored 2* basically so you hear a snapshot of what the world was like back then. The present is colder, the lights are out, the pipes have broken, there's a room that's flooded, furniture has been stolen, and people have defaced the walls. So, visually there's a very big difference between the two, but also a lot of thought in the level design has gone into gameplay because you can use it for some very specific scripted puzzles like in the past there is a sign on the wall that says, 'Warning, the balcony is loose and needs to be repaired'. We've got some wooden supports holding it. If you break them then, in the present three years later the balcony has collapsed and it reveals another path. There are some puzzles like that, but more generally speaking it can be used just to trick guards. For example if you look through time and see a guard standing there and you move around behind him and then change time so now you're standing behind him, you can choke him out. Time passes in both places at once, so as you're moving around the world you see the guards going by and you can make your decisions as to when to change time. It's just generally useful as a stealth mechanic."

Arkane's whole approach to stealth gameplay has been incredibly refreshing, doing away with stale gaming logic

It's important to note that while you can play through the entirety of *Dishonored 2* as either Emily or Corvo, both will get to experience these missions. They share the same game plot, but may have entirely different approaches or thoughts on the task at hand. Since you can't switch between them during the game, it's a great reason to play through twice, as if trying it out with a different Chaos level in mind wasn't reason enough.



Your Chaos level will have an effect on the kind of things you'll hear Emily or Corvo say as the game progresses and they react to the repercussions of their actions.

As we've started to see they each have very different powers too, which brings us back to the whole issue of balancing the game for different play styles. Arkane has given itself a lot of extra work by adding Emily to the mix and extending power-up trees to every ability that she and Corvo possess for even greater player customisation.

The powers are also an interesting reflection of their wielder, as Smith explains. "Emily's powers are all new and while Corvo's powers feel like they might come from the rat plague with a bunch of corpses and a horde of rats. Emily's powers could be seen through the lens of what would an empress have? Like Mesmerize or Domino, so that a bunch of people share the same fate. But she also had a privileged upbringing with a moment of darkness, and then she was back in the palace after the events of *Dishonored 1*. So Shadow Walk could be seen as her moment of darkness. The powers almost reflect who they are as people."

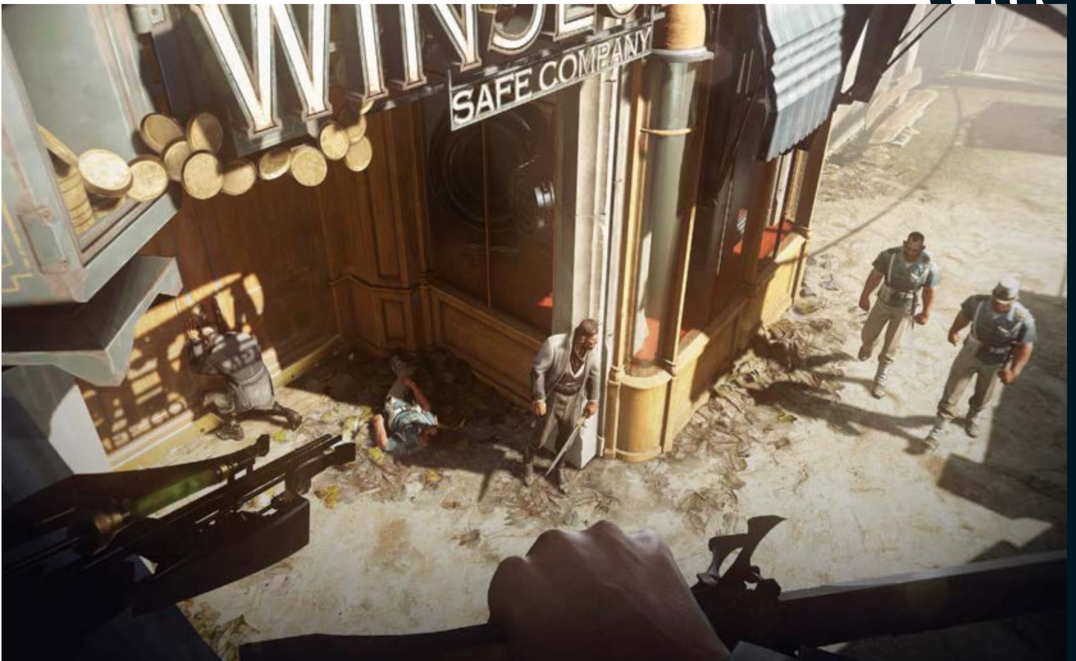
It's an interesting concept that has helped to make sure that while some of Corvo and Emily's powers are similar (Far Reach and Blink for instance) they remain oddly unique to each of them. Emily dazzles with Mesmerize, commands with Domino, can use a Doppelganger to distract from her true location and uses Far Reach to grab at the things she wants. Corvo is more of a ghost, possessing beings, Blinking from place to place, commanding the underbelly of the city with Devouring Swarm. Every power has a little personality behind it as a result.

Actually getting to these power sets is a painstaking process for Arkane too. "When we think about it we imagine combinations and then we play test a lot," reveals Smith. "For what it's worth we have a set of powers for Emily, we didn't like some of them, we changed them, we upgraded them, but we polled the team and one of the artists actually suggested Domino. Yoann [Guilloud] is our technical art lead and he suggested 'what if you had a power where you could link several people and if you did something to one of them it would affect the others'. Then the game designers, Dinga Bakaba our lead designer, they all thought about it. The way I was describing how we break it down and constrain it, that was a long discussion just on this one power. That's kind of how our team works. Somebody suggests something, we think about it, we try to reject it because it filters through rejecting, but if it's good and it survives that then we go into a process where we playtest a lot and we talk about how to constrain it. It's a long process."

We asked Smith is there was anything from this process that got dropped along the way that he quite liked originally. »



The dust storms of the Dust District of Karnaca and procedurally generated so there may be no way of predicting when they will sweep in or what their overall effect might be on the landscape.



There are even more endings possible in *Dishonored 2* than before with a low, mid and high Chaos approaches possible and, of course, two different character perspectives to follow.

"I don't know if we should talk about that, because normally when we do, somebody immediately on the internet says, 'oh my god, I want that so badly', but to be honest initially we had a power where you could walk on walls and ceilings and the camera would change to match your perspective, but less like you're clinging and more like you've warped reality. We talked about that in concept, but in a game where you can also Blink or Far Reach very rapidly across the environment and where we want you to feel like you're climbing, it maybe didn't make sense to add that in as well. But that's an example. We go through a long brainstorming process."

> They wanted more Dishonored. Bigger and better Dishonored

And those powers that survived the process also need to offer interesting upgrade trees that don't imbalance the experience. Emily's Doppelganger is an interesting example, allowing her to create a decoy lookalike of herself. With upgrades this Doppelganger can also be used to fight on your behalf or you could use Domino to chain her to the guards so that if they cut her down they would only be killing themselves in the process. And all of Corvo's powers have been upgraded and tweaked too, with Bend Time now able to be incrementally controlled, moving time forward little by little to create chains of events that YouTube kill streak sharers are going to love. In fact, Arkane had some of the top YouTube uploaders come in and test the game to see what they thought of the changes. Knowing how closely fans are following the game means a lot to this team.

"It's followed by a lot of fans who are Twitching. It's followed by people who are trying to get deeper into the world," says Mitton. "They ask questions about the lore, about the groups, about the characters. We always try to answer positively to players in general, speed runners and fans in general."

"The depth and the passion of their response has been great," adds Smith. "They respond to the visuals, they respond to the characters, they respond to the gameplay, they respond to the lore."

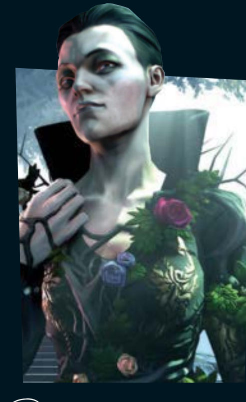
In many respects *Dishonored* has inherited the first-person stealth throne from *Thief*, picking up a lot of fans from the classic series. It has taken up some of the style and feel of Looking Glass Studios titles and infused it with more nuanced gameplay and deeper thematic narratives. In this respect, adding the voice of the original protagonist, Garrett, to the game made a lot of sense, even if many might have thought doing so would upset fans of *Dishonored*'s silent protagonist Corvo.

"We talked even during *Dishonored 1* about what if we could get [Stephen Russell for] Corvo, and we weren't as sure about that then as we are now," Smith tells us. "Because the fact is that now Corvo is 15 years older, so Stephen Russell feels like an even better fit. He's world weary. The guy's seen too much, but he's not so sorrowful. He has the soul of a poet on some levels. He's a romantic who watched the woman he loved die. Who watched his daughter grow up and protected her and so it was important to us. Once we had decided that we wanted to go after Stephen Russell we called him and we talked to him. I met him in Los Angeles, he flew in from the Boston area and we spent some time talking about the voice. He was familiar with the game and he knew we were big fans of his. He had talked to Raph and me on many occasions because we wanted to work with him in some capacity. We're big fans of *Thief*. He flew to LA and we spent some time practicing and talked about finding the character."

A similar process was gone through with Erica Luttrell who takes over as a grown up Emily Kaldwin following her depiction as a child in *Dishonored* by Chloë Grace Moretz. Since Kaldwin was already a voiced character from the original game it seems only right that this should continue and that Corvo should receive the same treatment. Having Russell take on the role seems like the perfect marriage, but he didn't just show up and churn out his lines in a Garrett style. "He tried on different voices," Smith informs us. "He has many different voices and we finally hit on something that was not just the clichéd gravelly badass, but instead it's a little more thoughtful. He's a bit of a craftsman, 'how am I going to get over there and take this guard down?', and that kind of thing. It was a great experience working with Stephen Russell and Erica Luttrell."

But ultimately the mission for Arkane was a rather simple one on paper according to Smith. "They wanted more *Dishonored*. Bigger and better *Dishonored*. Upgrades to the rendering to support the art direction." And that's exactly what the team has tried to deliver, building on the foundations it established and gradually embellishing its greatest strengths to make them even better.

With all the steampunk styling of *Dishonored*, we can't help but think of Arkane's stealth action experience as having similarities to a perfectly timed and balanced watch. It's built of many pieces, all of which seem fine on their own and even if used carelessly would still result in a working piece of machinery. However, they are not only well crafted pieces, but well balanced against each other, working in tandem to keep the whole machine working beautifully. *Dishonored 2*'s pieces all appear to be in place, more intricate and complex than they've been before, but just as polished. This is another very promising game from the French studio.



Who is Delilah Kaldwin?

THE MYSTERY OF THE DUNWALL USURPER

Arkane hasn't said too much about the circumstances of Emily Kaldwin being chased out of Dunwall and losing her throne other than to say it is because of an 'otherworldly usurper'. But the special edition of *Dishonored 2* comes with a promotional poster for Empress Delilah Kaldwin. It seems likely that this is actually Delilah Copperspoon, a major character from *Dishonored* DLC expansions, *The Knife Of Dunwall* and *The Brigmore Witches*.

In fact it is revealed in *The Knife Of Dunwall* that Delilah has a plot to possess a young Emily Kaldwin and take control of the empire as a result. Since she was defeated in *The Brigmore Witches* story we can assume she failed in this attempt, but perhaps her time trapped in the Void has lead to this new challenge.

Her use of the surname Kaldwin has two possible explanations. Either she is secretly the sister of the last Empress, Emily's mother, Jessamine Kaldwin, with whom she is believed to have once been friends, or through some magic she fools everyone into believing she is a Kaldwin and has a rightful claim to the throne.

Either way, if you want to know more about her you should check out the original *Dishonored*'s DLC to see what she's all about.



THE LONG ROAD AHEAD

HANDS-ON VERDICT WITH **FINAL FANTASY XV** – IS IT THE PHOENIX DOWN THAT SQUARE ENIX DESPERATELY NEEDS IT TO BE?



F*INAL FANTASY XV* **WAS NEVER GOING TO DELIVER A TYPICAL JRPG ADVENTURE.** It has always been touted as "a fantasy based on reality" though the reality of that statement doesn't quite sink in until you are playing it for yourself. *Final Fantasy XV* actively attempts to bring the background sounds and scenes of our life to the fore - warping them towards the fantastical the deeper the game sinks its claws into your soul. But after many hours spent with *XV*, it's difficult still to get a sense of the scale to this fantasy – this tale of four boisterous buddies fighting to save their world and get the girl – or from where indeed it may emerge.

For a game bearing the Final Fantasy branding, it isn't supposed to be like this, is it? Steeped so heavily in the monotony of the day-to-day grind? It's a question worth considering. But here we are all the same, stranded on the long and open road between Insomnia and Altissia. This is our introduction to the world of Eos and *Final Fantasy XV*. Our ride – the Regalia – has suffered from overexposure to the elements, becoming as useful as our four companions seem upon first introduction. Noctis, Prompto, Ignis and Gladiolus, four kids that are dressed in all black, totally unperturbed by the toxic concoction of going hell for leather in the scorching Eos sun. We'd say that the attire seems a touch impractical for the quest of a lifetime, but then who are we to criticise the design decisions made by famed Japanese fashion label Roen?

A gentle squeeze of the right trigger and the Regalia begins to crawl into action, moving slowly towards a gas station swallowed by the distant horizon. Our four compatriots are hauling the vehicle to Hammerhead by hand, giving us an opportunity to take in the scene. Power lines run alongside us leading the way, towering mountains and lush foliage can be seen twisting off into the distance. Claptrap cars speed past us, »

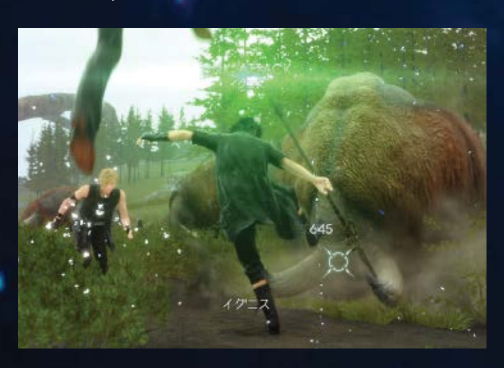
MAGICAL MASTERY

Understanding the changes to spells and sorcery



Magic has undergone a complete overhaul in Final Fantasy XV, becoming a little more obtuse but a lot more interesting in the process. Resources are now required to unleash magical attacks; these can be picked up from enemy corpses or mined from nodes in the world – essentially Draw Points, if you remember those from *Final Fantasy VIII*. You'll then need to craft yourself some spells.

Between three elemental slots – Blizzard, Fire and Thunder – you'll be able to decide how much energy you want to commit to a Magic Flask, which in turn decides how powerful the attack will be. It doesn't end there though; you can actually add *anything* from your inventory into the mix, which in turn will modify the effect. Adding a Phoenix Down to a flask of Lightning magic will cause it to strike enemies three times, for example. It's a greatly improved and surprisingly deep take on Rikku's Overdrive Mix from *Final Fantasy X*.





Combat sees all four of the heroes working together. While you are playing as Noctis, you do temporarily lose control of him if you activate one of your companions' techniques; giving you the opportunity to hit a QTE to follow up with a combo attack.

> "Square Enix has been careful to set a distinction between its game being set in an open-world and it being an open-world experience"

sputtering out a concoction of rust and gasoline; what a bloody lovely fantasy this is proving to be. Florence and the Machine dominate the soundscape with a warbling rendition of Ben E King's seminal *Stand By Me*, Welsh's dispassionate delivery helping to establish a scene and sound that's tonally inconsistent with what we know and have come to expect of *Final Fantasy*.

We are all but ten minutes into this adventure, one that's a decade in the making. It's been a bizarre blend of tight leather, dazzling sights, exhaustive quips and an array of gravity-defying hairstyles that came to define the late Nineties - if anything it's nostalgic, albeit for all the wrong reasons.

There are moments much like these peppered all throughout our time with *XV*. Examples of elements born out from our modern-day reality that seem to actively encroach upon the fantasy that we are attempting to escape into. But Square Enix had to do something different, it had to turn the tide of discontent that has been threatening to swallow its biggest franchise into the void. *Final Fantasy XV* is the strange and occasionally wonderful answer.

WEATHERING THE STORM

There was a time, not so long ago, that *Final Fantasy* was considered to be the absolute pinnacle of RPG design. It was a brand that you could trust to challenge convention, strive for innovation and set a new standard of play across the industry. This was long before the schism, before



The Regalia, your vehicle in *Final Fantasy XV*, is not going to continuously break down, though it can run out of fuel. In that instance you'll either need to walk to a local gas station, get it towed or try pushing it. Life is tough in Eos.

the distinction crystallised between Japanese and Western RPGs. But somewhere across the generational divide, *Final Fantasy* lost its way. It was consumed by a storm of shifting expectations and core design changes – fuelled in part by Square Enix's indecision as to which of the two disparate RPG markets it wanted to capture with its output.

Final Fantasy XV director Hajime Tabata knows this conundrum all to well. He will be the first to tell you that the brand's image has become a shadow of its former self. "The way we understood Final Fantasy after our analysis is that it was a dying IP that had already peaked," claimed Tabata in an interview with *Game Informer* in early 2016, a feeling that had no doubt been exacerbated by the critical appraisals of *Final Fantasy XIII* and commercial failings of its two divisive sequels, *XIII-2* and *Lightning Returns*.

In the four years between that trilogy's opening and closing chapters, it shed 5.1 million players, with the latter selling just 1.4 million units globally. *Final Fantasy* hardly commands the global respect that it once did, and yet, here we are with one of Square Enix's most ambitious games in our hands. It's a multi-platform, cross-media and grossly expansive project putting over 300 staff at Square Enix's Business Division 2 (BD2) hard to work. That's the sort of commitment you only tend to see when a studio is intent on doing right by its players. Instead of merely toeing the line, Square Enix is looking to *Final Fantasy XV* to rejuvenate the niche market, the franchise and its reputation in the industry - no matter how difficult the road to completion may be.

The relationship between the four heroes has proven to be one of the best aspects of the game. While it's certainly silly at times (most of the time) the characterisation and dialogue from each is incredibly strong.

Final Fantasy XV has been designed and developed with a clear and unified vision behind it. Behind those huge open environments, the complex political themes, a friendship-focused story and the action-orientated combat stands a set of core principles that are guiding the team. They aren't new – they are the same principles that pushed the team to deliver some of the most legendary RPGs we have ever played.

Tabata wants *XV* to challenge the status quo, to provide a peerless experience like the series was always renowned for doing. He's also intent on taking full advantage of the powerful hardware available to his team, combining cutting-edge technology with a fresh and challenging design to set a new standard. These two ambitions have imbued every single Final Fantasy game – though they haven't (arguably) worked in perfect harmony since 1999's *Final Fantasy VIII*.

Square Enix has weathered the storm and survived years of player discontent to reach this moment. Interest may be split (if not entirely waning) following the company's MMO ambitions, its slew of mobile titles, array of HD remasters and disappointing sequels, but now is the time to see whether Tabata has what it takes to steer Final Fantasy out of the storm and towards a new horizon. If he can't, there's a very high chance Square Enix will actually deliver on a promise that it made almost 30 years ago: it'll deliver *the* final fantasy in *XV*. 29 November 2016 is the make or break moment the franchise never wanted to face. »

HOURS IN EOS

There's a lot we could say about our time with *Final Fantasy XV*. While young prince Noctis and his three companions are heading straight to Altissia – where he is to be wed to Lady Lunafreya of Tenebrae – we could make a beeline and take you straight to spoiler city. We've played through a *secret* chapter – one that resembles *Final Fantasy II*'s stunning opener in terms of form and presence. We've encountered strange villains, met new heroes and visited beautiful locales. But to reveal any of these would not only violate the pretty horrible NDA we had to sign, but it would (more importantly) spoil the splendour of discovering it first hand. But we will say this: when Square Enix says it is revolving *XV*'s story around themes of destiny, friendship and legacy, it means it.

Some of the best times we spent with *Final Fantasy XV* were the moments while, Prompto dishes out high fives in the back seat of the car and talks about Noctis's dog (as seen in the *Kingsglaive* film) who he thought was, and we quote, "totes adorbs." You know, we're inclined to agree.

The banter between the four friends seems to be one of the game's crowning achievements – both in terms of its execution, animation and localisation; it helps bring a sense of reality and connection to the events that are slowly unfolding, hitting close to home for all involved. But there's that word again, reality. Gun-arms, Gunblades, and tails fluttering in the wind don't feel as if they would have a place in this world. Square Enix has done its best to ground classic franchise identifiers – such as the ever-lovable Chocobos, inclusion of crystals and screen-dwarfing Summons – as much as possible, at least. Even the hub-areas and giant cities we've encountered seem

> "FINAL FANTASY XV: IT IS SIMULTANEOUSLY A TECHNICAL MARVEL AND TECHNICALLY A MESS"

it allowed for quiet reflection. Cruising through the desert in the Regalia with huge beasts flanking either side of us, simply existing in the world – leave them be or attack them for XP and rare items, it's up to you. We're listening to *Final Fantasy VII* battle classics on the radio while trying to desperately recall the names of our favourite *Final Fantasy X* tracks to see if it's on the playlist as we let the autopilot take the wheel. All the rooted in some form of recognisable reality, from greasy-spoon restaurants at Hammerhead – where you can find tips on side quests and accept monster hunting bounties – to the tropical resort of Lestallum, a Cuba-inspired city that's dwarfing in its size. It's certainly a little bizarre, but impressive all the same, especially as all of these disparate elements essentially exist in one, huge open world. »



We aren't allowed to say much of what Chapter Zero contained, but suffice to say *Final Fantasy XV* will no doubt either be an adventure that spans *many* years or there is some time-travel tomfoolery afoot. Can you recognise the guy in this screenshot?



One of your earliest tasks in *FFXV* will be travelling Eos to find 13 hidden Royal Arms. Weapons that hold powerful abilities – those of a king – that takes down foes with ease at the cost of MP. It'll take hours to find them all.

A GRADUAL EVOLUTION

Introducing the Ascension Grid

Pretty much everything you do in *Final Fantasy XV* will earn you Ascension Points (AP) and you'll need that all important resource for levelling up your party members and upgrading their abilities. The Ascension Grid is where you'll manage your upgrades; think of it as a simplified Sphere Grid from *Final Fantasy X*.

AP points are shared between all four characters, so you'll need to wisely balance your spending across the Grid. It is possible to over-level one hero, leaving the others woefully underpowered. As for what you're investing in? The Grid tends to veer off in offensive, defensive and utility trees, so you can decide to immediately spec Noctis in more powerful attacks/combo possibilities or look to allow him to wear two status-boosting bracelets. The three other heroes can also improve their combat decimating techniques, become better in support roles or gain the ability to wield new weapons. All told, it's a nice revision of a familiar system.



PHOTO BOMB

FFXV HAS THE BEST PHOTO MODE, EVER

Each of the four heroes has a particular skill. These can be levelled up throughout the adventure, unlocking new skills and opportunities. Noctis's is fishing, Ignis's is cooking and Gladiolus's is scavenging. But it's Prompto's that we had the most fun using and levelling up, because it's essentially a fantastic take on photo mode. Prompto is an amateur photographer and he's making a photo journal of the lads' adventure.

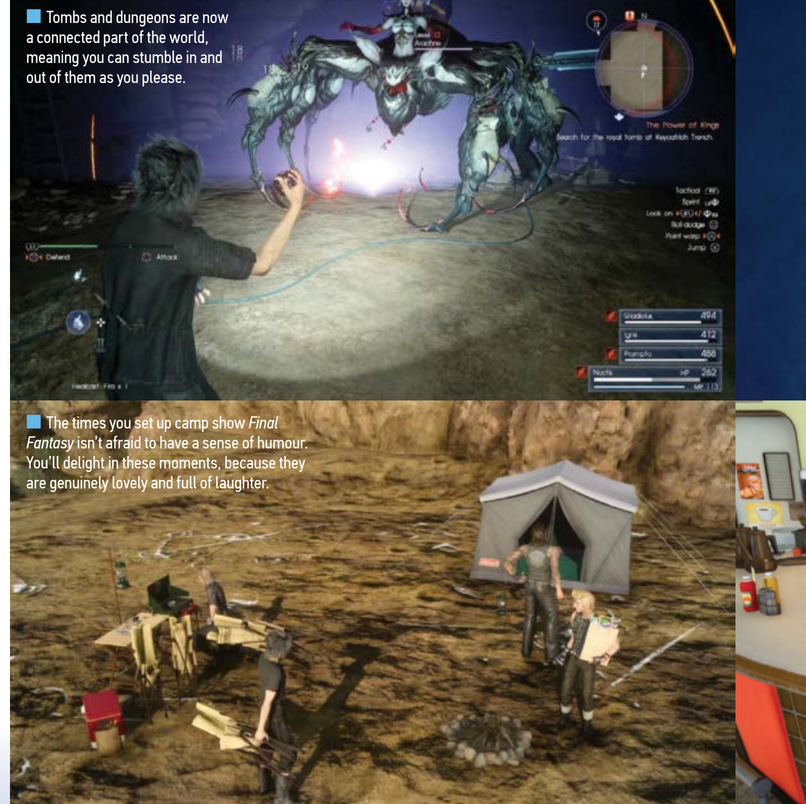
There are times, as you're out in the world, where he will prompt you to stand for a group shot or you'll be able to get him to take particular poses over lovely vistas, but for the most part he will just snap away with you none the wiser. Then, when you set up camp to eat, level up and talk to your companions, you'll be able to scroll through all of his snaps and save your favourites. Trust us, they are often amazing. The game engine knows when a photo is worth taking and the result is a random collection of events. Many of them are the guys chilling out or goofing around – awkward profile shots or interesting battle snaps. Returning to a camp is never a chore, because you know you'll have some crazy, wonderful and lovely photos to scroll through. Rumour has it that levelling up this skill will let you drop Instagram style filters over your photos before you share them online.







In certain situations, when a powerful attack is barrelling towards you, the game crawls to a halt and gives you the opportunity to hit a button prompt to block, which in turn lets you parry. It's a clunky system in the build that we played.



Tombs and dungeons are now a connected part of the world, meaning you can stumble in and out of them as you please.

The times you set up camp show *Final Fantasy* isn't afraid to have a sense of humour. You'll delight in these moments, because they are genuinely lovely and full of laughter.



“Combat is a huge part of Final Fantasy, and to see it reduced to such a basic state makes us wonder whether Square Enix has truly learned anything from the Final Fantasy XIII era”

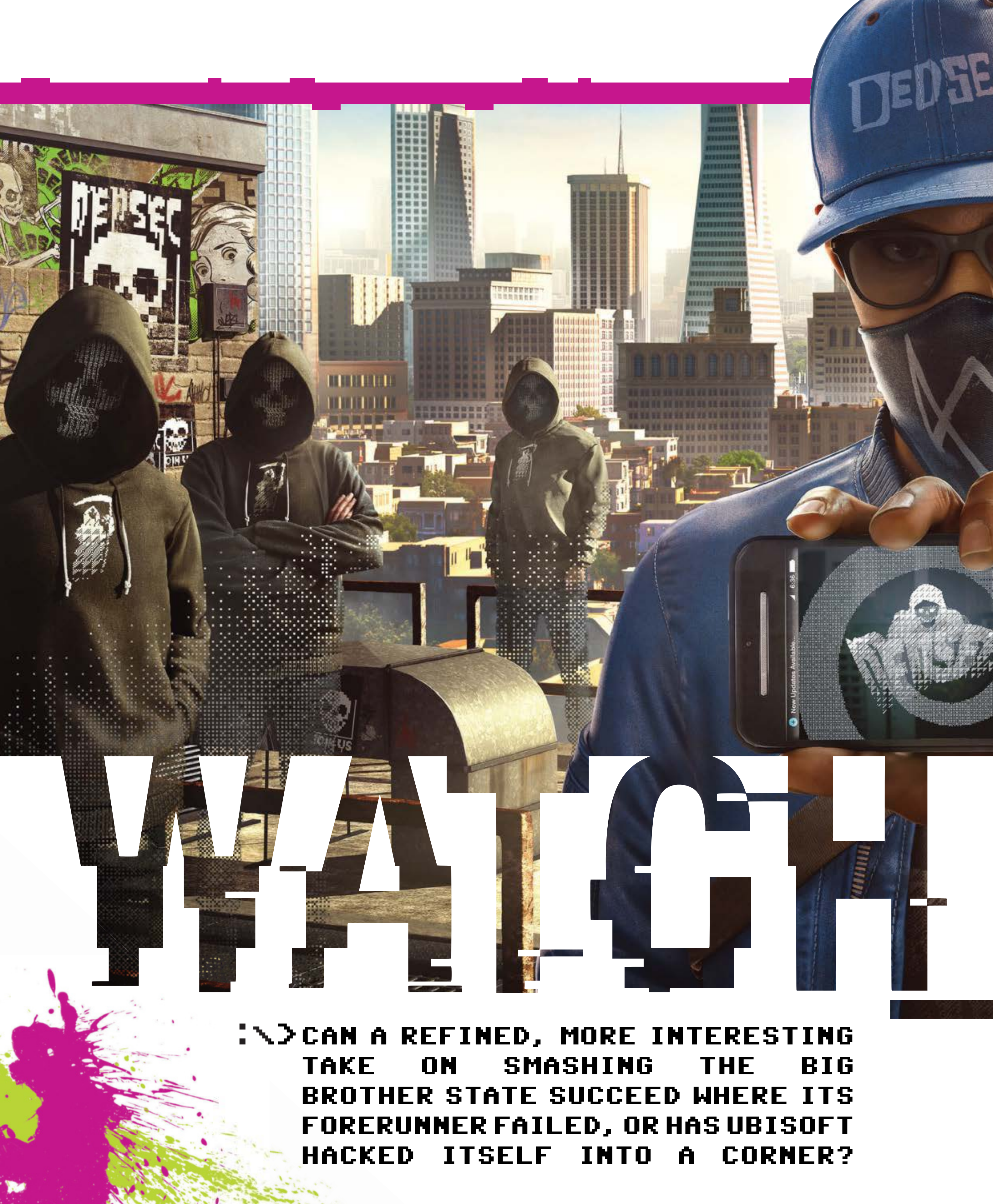
When we talk about an “open world” it might not be in the way you immediately expect. It'll no doubt conjure certain expectations towards everything from quest design to game structure, not to mention exploration and characterisation. But Square Enix has been careful to set a distinction between its game being set in an open world and it being an open-world experience. Crucially, *XV* is the former. Don't come to Eos expecting a game as open ended as *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* or *Fallout 4*. *XV* isn't a game where you'll find a distinctive meta-game running throughout specific districts, nor will you see a side-quest from every NPC with a VO or have the ability to forge your own story or shape your political standing within the world. *Final Fantasy XV* is first and foremost a story-focused game, allowing as much freedom around its core narrative arc as possible.

In many respects, this feels as if *XV* has been designed as a direct reaction to the complaints levied at *XIII*'s famed 30-hour linearity. It immediately modernises Final Fantasy while continuously making you feel as if you're part of a wider world – a small piece of a much larger puzzle. Once you have access to a fully fixed and fuelled Regalia, you are free to drive and explore. Whether you go off in search of side-quests (of which there were plenty to be found), head out in search of Royal Arms (13 powerful weapons scattered across the land that, if found, imbue Noctis with mysterious kingly powers) or in pursuit of the story, you are free to make that decision.

After five hours with the game, we had one overriding opinion of *Final Fantasy XV*: it is simultaneously a technical marvel and technically a mess. The technology the open world is built on is unquestionably impressive. The scale of the world, the creatures that inhabit it and how reactive it seems to your presence never failed to make us confident that *XV* could be another classic in the making; you've never experienced a mainline *Final Fantasy* game like this before.

Sadly, it's in desperate need of optimisation. This is no doubt the reason that the final game – which is now content complete – has been delayed until November. Frequent frame-rate problems, routine screen-tear, graphical pop-in, lip-sync inaccuracies and numerous other issues all cropped up during our play test with the Xbox One version. The PlayStation 4 version, which we only saw in action, suffered from similar ailments, though perhaps not to the same frequency.

We're confident that many of these problems can be fixed before launch. Two months is a hell of a long time to focus purely on optimisation and certification, especially with a development team and QA division as expansive as the ones found at Square Enix. We do have one major concern with *XV*, however, and we struggle to see the team addressing it ahead of launch: there are serious problems with the basic playability and focus of the combat system and camera.



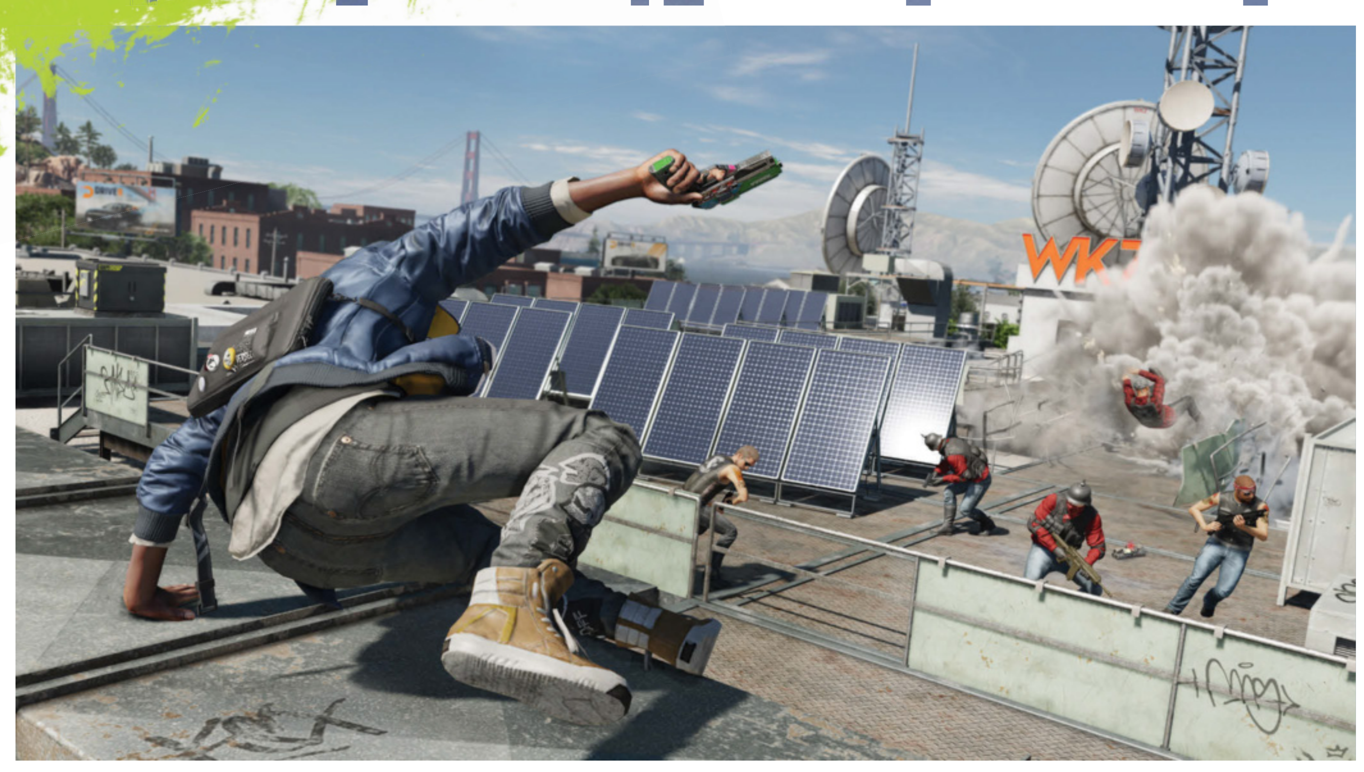
WATCH

:\> CAN A REFINED, MORE INTERESTING TAKE ON SMASHING THE BIG BROTHER STATE SUCCEED WHERE ITS FORERUNNER FAILED, OR HAS UBISOFT HACKED ITSELF INTO A CORNER?



DOGS 2

If there's one thing that the original Watch Dogs lacked entirely, it's cohesion. While the best games of its ilk come together as one glorious package, Ubisoft's open-world hackstravaganza never managed to convey any degree of logic that truly bound its disparate elements together. It wasn't one game – it was a bunch of different games of varying quality playing out at the same time. And while the same criticism could be levelled at other jack-of-all-trades open-world games, including the mighty *Grand Theft Auto*, you don't hear it often because of the strength of the glue Rockstar uses to assemble its many misshapen fragments of popular culture. In the case of *Watch Dogs*, however, none of its individual elements – not the solid open world it took place in, not the interesting premise, not its ingenious suite of online options – ever managed to step out from the shadow of its offensively unlikeable and unlikely protagonist. A walking scowl in an iconic cap on a tedious revenge quest against the surveillance state with the help of a magic phone.



"It's fair feedback – there are quite a few people who said the same thing," admits *Watch Dogs 2*'s senior producer Dominic Guay when we discuss the clear disconnect in the original game between narrative and gameplay. "There was a bit of polarisation around the story and we got that. I don't think Aiden was a very approachable character – I mean, he was broken inside, he had a gritty past history and we tried to treat that with respect as he wouldn't be goofing around as his family died around him, but this time we made a character that was lighter and more relatable, we think." New hero Marcus already feels like a marked improvement, a born-and-bred hacker rather than a gruff middle-aged man who decided to seek revenge by downloading a couple of catch-all apps from the App Store. "He's fun-loving, young, smart and sees the positives in people and we think that's something people can relate to a bit more. We tried to bring in the humour and fun style of the hacker culture inside of our group. There's more fun – the hackers want to have fun while still dealing with the thematics of *Watch Dogs*, which are not always light, so we still have those things that are dire and serious and somewhat related to things happening in the real world, but the characters always try and take it with a smile. We're trying to get a nice balance."

It's not like Aiden Pearce was the only issue with the original game, mind. With a little of that aforementioned cohesion, it might have been possible to get players to overlook or, better yet, not even notice the formulaic structure and generic mission design – stablemates like *Far Cry* and *Assassin's Creed* often manage to do just that, after all. "It's a tough one," muses Guay. "Everyone who makes an open-world [game] has a different formula. At Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed II* had a lasting impact on a lot of our open-world formulas which, to summarise it, is a series of narrative missions inside of an open world with side activities. We wanted to change that with *Watch Dogs*, so what we did is [create a new] quest structure so you find various DedSec operations in the world and you accumulate them – you have a form of quest journal called the DedSec App where you can have all the operations ongoing for DedSec and you can decide which you want to do. Your goal for the game is to accumulate as many followers for DedSec [as possible] – have a movement of people supporting DedSec and the more you have, the more power you have and the more abilities you have, the more resources [you have]. Ultimately, you have to get to the end of the game and are able to reset the system and have a major impact on the world and try to overthrow a corrupted establishment."

This refined structure is something that Ubisoft has been talking about since this sequel was announced, with the idea of progression not through a fixed chain of story missions but rather via a more open system. Using a variety of tasks and options to build up to more important, original story beats is an extremely interesting proposition. "The only goal, to simplify, is to accumulate those followers however you can do it," Guay reiterates. "You have complete freedom in the 'quests' you're going to do, the operations you're going to do, the order you're going to do them, *if* you're going to do them. Multiplayer, co-op and PvP all give you followers. World activities, things you can do all give you followers so in that sense, you decide what you want to do. That will accumulate more followers, which will open up more opportunities and move the narrative forward. It's not completely open – there

:\> Marcus has already made up for the miserable misstep that was Aiden. The importance of a likeable (or at least interesting) protagonist has never been made clearer than it was by *Watch Dogs'* borderline insufferable antihero.





:\> With its focus on hi-tech gear, *Watch Dogs 2* has found in California the perfect setting. The varied environments will make for the perfect playground in which to wreak havoc across land, sea and air.

{There's more fun – the hackers want to have fun while still dealing with the thematics of Watch Dogs, which are not always light}

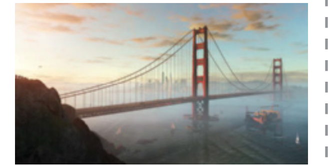
are a couple of turning points in the story that we wanted to have in the arc – but there is also a lot of freedom in how you choose to go about getting those followers." While not entirely non-linear, it's certainly a step in the right direction for the next generation of open world games – with both solo and multiplayer activities (the latter being effectively endless) feeding into progress towards the ultimate goal of unlocking these key missions, there's no pressure to do anything except what you enjoy as you progress through the game – complete player freedom, assuming that these milestone structured missions are worth working towards in the first place.

And they do appear to be, from what we've seen so far. The first game's missions had a tendency to force players' hands in what gimmicks and gadgets they should be using to get the job done. "That's actually a really good point and something we've learned from *Watch Dogs*," Guay confirms. "We wanted to have big set pieces and because of that, sometimes we forced players down a player style – we said 'okay, there's going to be a car chase' or 'there's going to be a shootout' and that kind of removes a lot of player freedom. So our approach with our missions in *Watch Dogs 2* was to give players what we call 360 degrees of freedom, which is not only the freedom to approach the layout from different directions but also to play it from your own play style. Most of our missions are designed to have multiple points of entry – they're made so you can come in from above, get in with your drone or stealth your way through, crash in with a truck… we're trying to give people different routes of entry but also to support different play styles. If I'm going to do a mission and at the end there's a cutscene where someone's coming at you with machine guns, you can't be stealthy because when you hit the cinematic and gun guys come in, you don't feel like you have any freedom as a player and think 'the game leads, I follow.' We want the player to lead so we didn't do stuff like that. If you want to stealth your way through missions, you can do it. We have testers playing every mission full stealth, guns blazing or also a style we like to call trickster which we didn't always support in *Watch Dogs* and we do now, which is only hacking and using your drones. Sometimes not even stepping inside your objective. Depending on the objective, if you need to get someone physically, you will need to go inside, but for a lot of missions you can just use your gadgets and hacking to get to your objective and then get out."

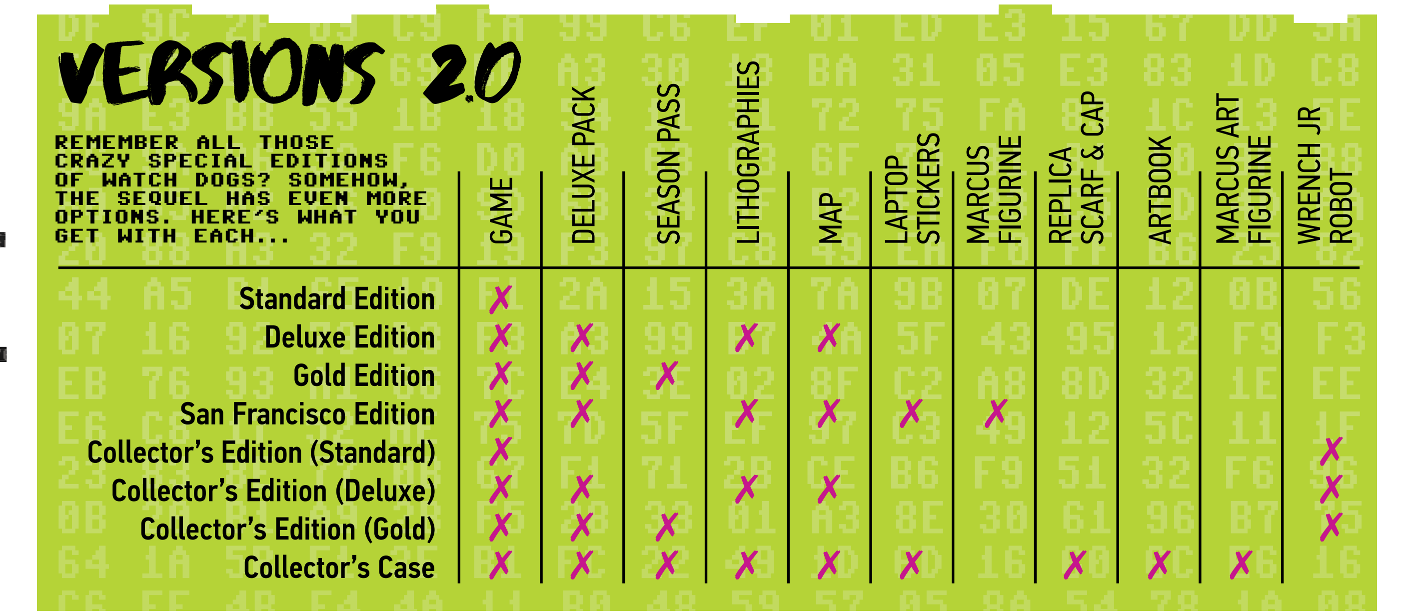


:\> Taking over technology remotely is no longer a simple toggle option in most cases. Usually, you'll get to interact with the object in whatever way you see fit, potentially making for some elaborate plans.





Much of this increased ability to rely on your tools and tech comes from the fact that your arsenal of hacking abilities and the potential to cause mayhem with them has grown hugely since the relatively limited options of the first game. If you got bored of fiddling with traffic lights and siphoning cash from the bank accounts of the needy (Aiden, you monster) relatively quickly, the new options laid on are likely to win back your attention. Each has more layers of usability than before too, as Guay is keen to explain in more detail. "There are up to four different types of hack you can have as you upgrade and unlock different skills, so let's take a person for example. You can distract them – you can have their phone ring, which is useful if you want to stealth, but if you do the same thing >>



VERSIONS 2.0

REMEMBER ALL THOSE CRAZY SPECIAL EDITIONS OF WATCH DOGS? SOMEHOW, THE SEQUEL HAS EVEN MORE OPTIONS. HERE'S WHAT YOU GET WITH EACH...

	GAME	DELUXE PACK	SEASON PASS	LITHOGRAPHIES	MAP	LAPTOP STICKERS	MARCUS FIGURINE	REPLICA SCARF & CAP	ARTBOOK	MARCUS ART FIGURINE	WRENCH JR ROBOT
Standard Edition	✗										
Deluxe Edition	✗	✗		✗	✗						
Gold Edition	✗	✗	✗								
San Francisco Edition	✗	✗		✗	✗	✗	✗				
Collector's Edition (Standard)	✗										✗
Collector's Edition (Deluxe)	✗	✗		✗	✗						✗
Collector's Edition (Gold)	✗	✗	✗								✗
Collector's Case	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗		✗	✗	✗	

in the context of a fight then if the person has a headset, you'll push sound through their headset to distract them. It's the same hack but depending on the context, it can have a different impact. As another example, you can send a person's information to a gang within your vicinity, marking the person as someone snitching on the gang. You'll see a gang show up on the spot, people will get out of the car, start trying to hit the guy… if you do this to someone who's a thug or an armed person themselves, they'll start fighting back and you'll have a gang war emerging from your hack. Another example is you can change someone's criminal record and call the cops on them. What's cool about that is it doesn't always end up the same. It doesn't always end the same way. You have to adapt to it – you don't know what'll happen so there's an element of surprise in it. If you called the cops on me, I'm probably just going to say 'you know what, arrest me!' Okay, end of situation. But I might freak out and start running and then you'll have a police chase emerging from it. You never know what will happen. There might be a firefight starting – maybe the cops are going through a mob layout and those cops start fighting the mob. The notion is that things emerge from the simulation and that the hacks are tools for the player to tweak the simulation and get what they want out of it. But it doesn't always work exactly the way you planned."

The idea of random elements isn't one that usually appeals in more structured, skill-based experiences, but open-world games typically revel in these kinds of unexpected shenanigans – from *Fallout* to *GTA*, *No Man's Sky* to *The Witcher*, the most interesting and memorable player stories you'll hear aren't from events that the developers have planned but from those that have emerged and developed organically in the otherwise normal passage of play. The more options and variables you bring in to play, the more potential there is for crazy stuff to happen, so every sound bite we hear about *Watch Dogs 2*'s newly upgraded hacking system is music to our mayhem-loving ears. "You can hack everyone – every individual NPC, every car," Guay enthuses. "We're bringing back a lot of the infrastructure and the hacks we had in *Watch Dogs* but we're also adding a lot of new ones. A lot of the new hacks we're implementing are things that you can actually remotely control. You can now control a crane and it's not just a binary up/down kind of thing – you can actually take full control of it with the analog sticks. We wanted to add more analogue controlled things like the cameras we had in the first game because it lets you express yourself a lot more. You can make a lot more plans with them. It just offers you a lot more freedom."

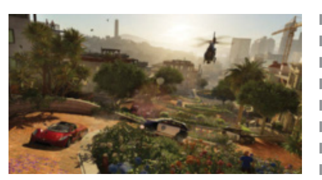
There's been a massive hike in the uptake of personal tech since the first game came out, with drones and similar gadgets growing more popular by the day. Naturally, this kind of tech is a perfect fit for a game like this, and Ubisoft isn't about to be left behind amid this craze. "We also added two new gadgets – two new craftable drones for the players," Guay confirms. "There's a flying drone you can control and a wheeled drone and from them you can also hack, so it extends your hacking ability into the world. They're kind of game-changers because if you want to play a mission only through hacking, you can use these tools to infiltrate a place without even setting foot in a building." How well this will work in practice, however, will be dependent on the vigilance of the AI towards such devices. If guards and gangs are as vigilant against, say, the ground drone as they would be against any other form of intruder, it'll amount to little





:\> If you're going for the stealthy approach, we'd suggest that running around in shirts and caps that advertise your affiliation with what is effectively a terrorist organisation might not be the best idea.

{The more options and variables you bring in to play, the more potential there is for crazy stuff to happen}



:\> *Watch Dogs 2* makes news that Assassin's Creed is taking the year off even sweeter, as lessons learned here can easily be adapted and incorporated into whatever the time-hopping sci-fi series looks to do next. It's clear that something needed to change, after all.



more than easy mode stealth – sneaking with the benefit of a low-profile, expendable replacement character. That said, its smaller form should allow it to reach areas that Marcus himself couldn't, cruising through vents, hatches and gaps to reach areas that stand to be less well covered by security. The flying drone has even more potential, although again it'll likely require videogame logic to be applied to make these things fun to use. Having used a few drones in real life, they're typically quite loud so we'll either need hard-of-hearing guards to turn a deaf ear or a system where more tactical deployment under the cover of background noise is optimal.

Drones and VR go hand-in-hand, the latter often used to facilitate immersive first-person flight experiences, although it doesn't seem like that aspect will be making its way into the game. "We don't have that, but that would be really cool," says Guay, although remotely piloting a device via an in-game camera that tracks it isn't a million miles away from what first-person flight offers in terms of gameplay options anyway. "VR to me is such a great feel but such a distinct feel from what we're doing. I think if we were to do it, we'd need to completely dedicate ourselves to it. We have VR teams working in the office and it seems like fun – there's a lot of unique challenges to it, but right now we're going to focus on just releasing the game for PC and consoles." VR might also have been a cool way to experience the amusing 'digital trips' of the original game, but that's even less likely to happen since they don't even exist any more. "We debated bringing them back and what we decided was instead of putting energy into digital trips, we would put our energy into activities that were in the real world," Guay tells us. "When you start building San Francisco Bay, there's just a ton of stuff that comes out of it. It's just such a great place with mountains and hills and great streets and back country so we wanted to exploit that. We added a lot more wheeled vehicles. We wanted to explore the back country layout so we added ATVs and motocross stuff like that and then we thought, 'wait, the bay is filled with boats!' so we worked with our friends at the Bucharest studio and they built actual sailboat dynamics.

"We invested in a lot of boats – sailboats, speedboats, stuff like that. It's not a vehicle per se but we also added in a lot of construction vehicles like cranes, lifts that you can control in an analogue way. And then there's the flying drone, which for me is a game-changer. We actually debated having the player pilot flying vehicles but we found it really didn't work with our

CHOOSE YOUR OWN HACKVENTURE

What kind of hacker will you choose to be?

STEALTH

MISSION: Take after Sam Fisher and Solid Snake to infiltrate targets without ever being spotted

>> Upgraded tech and new hacking options should stand to make pure stealth a more viable option than in the first game. You have myriad ways to distract patrolling guards and creating new entry points to many locations, so your only excuse for getting caught red-handed is that you messed up.

FOR FANS OF:
Metal Gear Solid, Thief

HYBRID

MISSION: Do whatever it takes to get the job done

>> With so many new systems layered on top of tweaks to old ones, this will be the play style most of us fall into, whether we want it or not. An all-out attack on an objective might present a way to cover your tracks, or a silent breach could go south after you're spotted. You need to be ready to react and adapt accordingly.

FOR FANS OF:
Deus Ex, BioShock

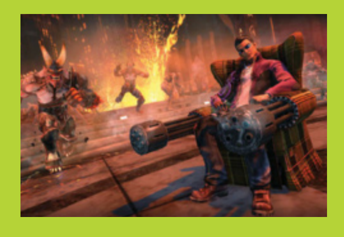


ANARCHIST

MISSION: If you're going to send a message, you might as well make it a loud one…

>> 3D printing your own guns, remotely accessing explosives and volatile hazards and generally taking chunks out of a surveillance state gone too far, there's nothing subtle about this approach. Then again, sometimes you just want to sit back and watch a lot of things explode. Or is that just us?

FOR FANS OF:
Saints Row, Just Cause



REMOTE

MISSION: Why break a sweat when you can get a bunch of 1s and 0s to do all the legwork?

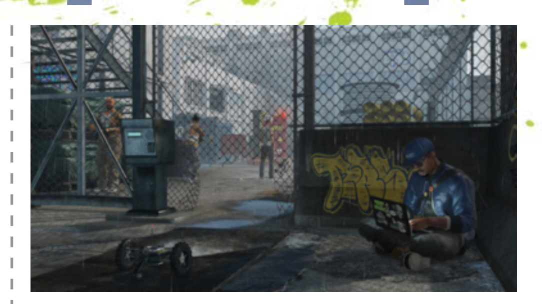
>> With the line-of-sight hacking of the first game ditched, you're now free to explore entire networks in order to use any devices attached remotely to do your digging for you. On top of this, drones can also be controlled from a safe distance to retrieve information or small objects from hostile locations.

FOR FANS OF:
Uplink, Battlefield 4: Commander Mode



game dynamics. Why would you hack when you can crash helicopters into stuff? It didn't work well for our fantasy but flying drones fit really well – it's very much tied to the maker culture, which is tied to hacking and it gives you that aerial view of the city – it's really great. I completely get why people buy flying drones now! At first I was a doubter but it's super fun to spy on people's back yards. We just started investing in fun real-world activities that fit inside our sandbox." Basically, he's saying that Chicago is no fun. Or that boats and drones are better than virtual drugs. Or both. Or neither. Whatever. San Francisco *is* pretty great, on that we can agree and we're looking forward to exploring the Bay Area, whether on foot, in a vehicle or even over a network.

"Another big change we did was we added a new feature called Network Hacking," Guay continues. "What that does is it lets you see the whole world through the lens of a hacker. So in that sense, you see all the things you can hack and it also allows you to hack through walls, which you couldn't do in *Watch Dogs* – you needed things to be in your line of sight to hack them. Now you can hack anything in that vicinity and it also shows you opportunities for hacking so it's a very useful way to extend your hacking abilities. Our idea with the hacking when we started the game was let's make it too powerful so the player can be super creative with it and then we'll balance it down the line. That was more our approach." That balancing act, again, is going to be a tricky one and without some restriction in place, there's nothing to stop Marcus doing all his hacking from the comfort of his apartment, smashing the system and sticking it to the man via his trusty laptop while he catches up on *Game Of Thrones* in his pants.





<I think Mr Robot nailed a form of hacking culture really well and we're obviously influenced by that>

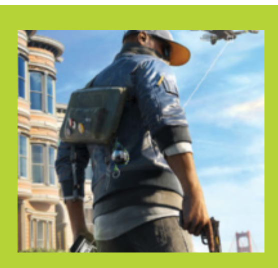
Speaking of popular TV shows, there's another that comes to mind when looking at *Watch Dogs 2*' new focus on hacker culture. "I don't think we were influenced directly by *Mr Robot* so much as we have the same influences," Guay reasons. "I think *Mr Robot* nailed a form of hacking culture really well and we're obviously influenced by that. In the first game you were playing a vigilante, someone who had traumatic events in his life but you weren't a hacker per se. Now you're playing as a hacker, so we studied hacker groups, we talked with hackers and got them to help revise our script – the same thing *Mr Robot* is also doing as we have similar influences. So I think it's a good thing we're getting similar kind of vibes!" he laughs. "Very different tones, though. We're trying to have a lighter tone than the last game because some people are going to spend hundreds of hours in our game. So if I watch TV or a movie and it's a bit sombre like *Watch Dogs* was, a bit darker, it's okay. But if you're going to spend two hundred hours in a world you want a bit of balance. It's an open world, so the world also has fun stuff in it."

So, less Aiden: good. More fun: good. More options: good. More interesting city: good. We were somewhat concerned at first about how Ubisoft would even *begin* to go about developing a sequel to such a melting pot of different ideas, themes and messages as *Watch Dogs* but with its laser focus on hacking culture and player freedom, the potential for an *Assassin's Creed II*-style revelation makes *Watch Dogs 2* one of the most exciting prospects for this year. We'll hack the hype train to limit its top speed and save a repeat of last time, but things are certainly looking up…





:\> Now that every individual can apparently be hacked, crowds are likely to present a double hazard – they're both walls of eyes that can spot or block your path, and walls of data that might make looking for a certain detail or individual in a sea of information difficult.



DRESSING THE PART

>> If, for whatever reason, you already like Marcus enough to consider cosplaying as him, Ubisoft has you covered. On the game's official site, there's an 80MB Cosplay Reference Guide PDF to download, featuring shots of every part of the new hero's ensemble from every angle you could ever want or need, right down to exact colour codes for every item. Knock yourself out.





THE TRIPLE-A TEAM

"WELCOME TO REFLECTIONS: A UBISOFT STUDIO"

A morning encounter with Pauline Jacquey begins with a handshake, you can tell a lot about a person by their morning etiquette. "My interest here is to show that Reflections: A Ubisoft Studio is special." Jacquey conducts her business like she does her introductions: calm, commanding and collected. The managing director offers us a wide smile and a firm grip, her other hand preoccupied with swiftly stirring a coffee, black. "We know that the games we are working on are special, but I'd like people to understand how special the studio is as well."

Jacquey offers us the beverage, a surprise power play or mere act of kindness? Definitely the latter, because, even after a career spanning 20 years of work and play for Ubisoft globally, she knows what a night in Newcastle can do to the soul of a weary traveller. We continue to exchange pleasantries as employees filter into the building, peering cautiously in our direction as they take position at desks filled with personal effects. A journalist, in the studio? The staff's smiles say welcome, though the eyes scream *interloper*. Some of the desks are empty, uncluttered; Reflections has 35 positions available and desks to fill, Jacquey would later inform us, though for now we were wide-eyed and observant.

It has been five years since Reflections earned itself a solo credit against a triple-A production – five years since the release of *Driver: San Francisco*. A sequel is well overdue, and interloper or not, *we were going to find it*. In the eyes of the press and public, Reflections has been relegated to the position of caretaker. Quietly assisting other Ubisoft studios from around the world on everything from *The Crew* and *Just Dance 2015*, to *Far Cry 3* and *Watch Dogs*. Indie darlings *Grow Home* and *Grow Up* came out of Reflections in the last 12 months, created by a team of just ten, what had the other 200 staff really been doing all of this time?

We weren't sure of what to expect from an invitation to tour the studio. We saw it as an opportunity to peek behind the curtain, to catch a glimpse of the Driver sequel we've long been craving, it had to be here. At the very least, we figured, we would catch a glimpse of a 1970 Dodge Challenger R/T from across a room, wire-framed on a screen somewhere. We would see a young artist, we hoped, painting shimmering yellow paint onto its digitised chassis and in our hearts we would know that the return of Tanner – and his seminal series, Driver – wouldn't be far behind. As it should happen, we discovered something far greater within the walls of this legendary British studio.

"IT WAS A STUDIO THAT HAD NO STRATEGY"

To get a sense of where Reflections is as a company now, you need to understand where it has come from. Founded 30 years ago, this UK studio is responsible for spearheading both *Driver* and *Destruction Derby*, two titles that helped establish Reflections as experts on everything and anything vehicular. Before that the studio made a name for itself pushing tech boundaries on the Amiga with *Shadow Of The Beast* and *Brian The Lion*. But it wasn't until Ubisoft purchased the company in 2006 – for an estimated 24 million dollars – that its fortunes began, seemingly, to waiver.

Driver: Parallel Lines failed to impress, as to did Wii exclusive *Emergency Heroes*. *Driver: San Francisco* was critically lauded but a commercial failure, with Jacquey noting that despite surpassing internal sales expectations the game failed to cover the money Ubisoft had spent on it. "It led the team to feel as if it had failed," says Jacquey, her voice imbued with a frankness that's hard to find in this industry. "I worked hard to make them understand that it is okay to fail... Ubisoft is a company in which you're okay to fail."

In a sense, it's this feeling that drives Ubisoft in every one of its endeavours. It is okay to fail, Jacquey suggests, because it should be seen as another opportunity to grow and develop – a chance to learn from your mistakes and strive to do better.

"I arrived here thinking that there was something to do with the culture of the studio, to make it a bit more 21st century, she says with a wide infectious smile. "Reflections was kind of isolated [from Ubisoft]," she notes. "It had a moment where its culture was not fitting. They were not benefiting from what I feel is strong in Ubisoft. I think a part of how I set myself down here was like, 'come on, Ubisoft is a better group or company than you think, so here is how it *could* work."

"About a year in, I was able to begin building a strategy with the team. Reflections was a studio that had no strategy. Driver as a franchise was silent, so what do we do next?" She paused for a second, adding, "this led me to what you see today." A confident, almost defiant declaration. That wide smile never once disappearing.

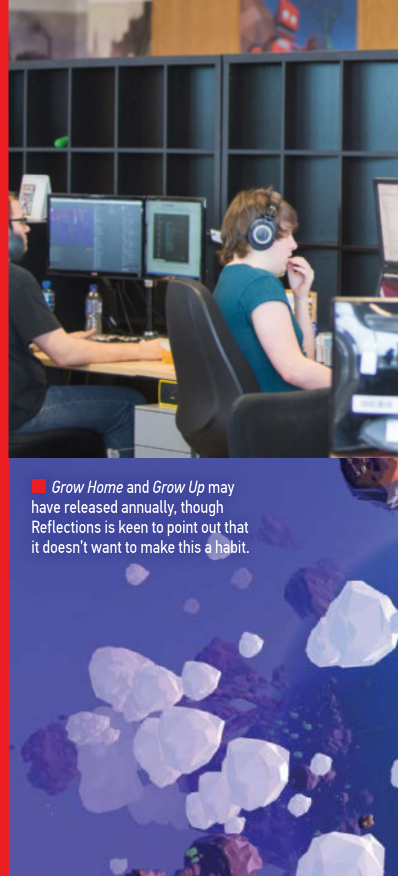
"THE FIRST IS LEGACY..."

Reflections as it exists now isn't what you may expect. It has been rebuilt around three core strands, designed in such a way that the studio's legacy doesn't stand in the way of its future – it supports it. For Ubisoft, it's too big of a task (or ask) for a single development studio to create and release a triple-A videogame on its own. That's where Reflections steps in: it isn't the caretaker of Ubi's properties, but the guiding hand behind the spotlight that so typically gets cast on whoever is taking centre stage.

A modular approach to game development has allowed Reflections to stay agile, work to its strengths and define itself as an outfit that other Ubisoft studios can turn to when they are



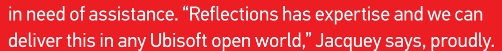
Don't worry, we asked the hard questions: no, Reflections didn't have anything to do with the driving in the original *Watch Dogs*. Yes, much of the team that developed *Driver: San Francisco* is handling the driving in *Watch Dogs 2*, and yes, it is much better.



Grow Home and *Grow Up* may have released annually, though Reflections is keen to point out that it doesn't want to make this a habit.



Reflections: A Ubisoft Studio has rebuilt its company culture around the concept of "ownership, creative freedom, transparency and trust." That's something managing director Pauline Jacquey was eager to instil in the studio as she looked to rebuild it.



in need of assistance. "Reflections has expertise and we can deliver this in any Ubisoft open world," Jacquey says, proudly.

"We have three strands that are really complementary with each other. The first is legacy: this is Reflections, we have driving excellence, we have a team of experts that is providing any Ubisoft open world with vehicle gameplay – from *Assassin's Creed*, to *Watch Dogs 2* to *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*, and more." *More*? This is where Driver was to be found, Jacquey suggested, just not in any form we might immediately recognise.

"Considering our legacy and considering the legacy of *Driver: San Francisco*, you can see it [live on] in our vehicle expert team. It's one way for us to keep the spirit of Driver alive is when you see what we are doing in *Watch Dogs 2* and *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*. In terms of the gameplay experience, *it's there*. It's in a different format, but the spirit is there."

We meet with various members of Reflection's vehicle expert team. Many of the producers, such as Will Musson, have been with the company for over two decades. He hands us a controller and lets us play around with vehicles in both games, showing us how Reflection's proprietary technology allows the team to tweak and fine-tune everything – from how close the camera pulls from the car during a power slide to the weight of individual components beneath the hood – on the fly.

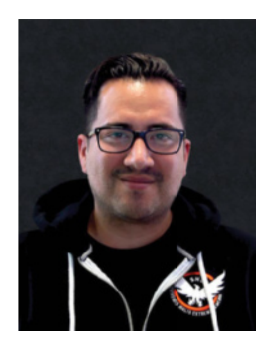
We suggest that, were these tools available to other studios in the Ubisoft umbrella, couldn't the Montreal or Paris teams figure it out for themselves? The studio hands them the tools, Musson suggests, but they come straight back to Reflections for their expertise.

"WE DELIVERED HALF OF THE WORLD OF *THE DIVISION*"

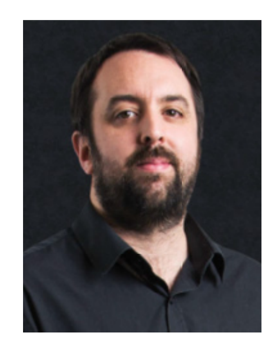
"The second strand of Reflections is long-term collaboration on the biggest properties of Ubisoft," says Jacquey. "We have been very involved with *The Division* over the last three



PAULINE JACQUEY
Managing director



MANNY DIAZ
Level design director



BEN MERRICK
Vehicle realisation expert



PETE YOUNG
Producer



Reflections built over half of the districts in *The Division*, including six main missions (and the awesome helicopter fight during the conclusion) and designed much of the AI. The studio essentially co-developed it in the shadows alongside Massive Entertainment.

FIGHTING TO SURVIVE

Is Driver dead or alive?

Reflections is busy building the future of *The Division*, assisting in the production of *Watch Dogs 2* and *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* and even building small indie-scale projects with its mini-incubator, so what about Driver? Is the franchise going to stay on ice forever? Jacque says that – in spite of *Driver: San Francisco*'s disappointing sales – there's still a future for Tanner and his underground antics.

"It is still alive. Ubisoft totally knows the value of its IPs. Just because the franchise is not active doesn't mean it is dead – dead doesn't exist in the world of franchises. So, of course it is alive… I love *Driver: San Francisco*, it's really something that we keep in our minds. The thing is, we don't know yet how to approach that franchise in the right way. We think about it, we discuss it, but we don't know yet what the best way to approach it is. It's here in our hearts, that's for sure."

years and we continue building the future of the franchise. We delivered half of the world of *The Division* in the first game and more; we just delivered the first paid DLC [Underground], which offers procedural content."

Wait, hold up. *Half*? A staff of around 120 essentially built all of the districts to the east of the Dark Zone – there's a noticeable shift in the design when you reach the bottom of the map and that's where Reflections took over from Massive. But it didn't stop there, the studio was also responsible for designing much of the UI, developing half of the main story missions (including the final mission), as well as designing and implementing many of the skills too.

"The way that we are working with Massive is that there is a lot of trust. Within our playground, we conduct things the way we want and that works for me," notes Jacquey, who says that it's been important for everybody involved to put their ego aside and get into the mindset of collaboration. "I think if you are super ego driven, working as an associate team is a humbling experience. But, honestly, even if you're in Massive it's a team effort. You're never really leading or owning anymore [at Ubisoft]… it's never like you're in total control from the start to the end."

The Division is the fastest-selling new IP, ever. It's one of Ubisoft's most successful properties. Is it really something that a B-team would be trusted with? No. But Reflections is no B-team or caretaker, it's the studio Ubisoft calls upon when it needs to draw upon expertise from a number of different disciplines. Under the guiding hand of Jacquey, Reflections has transformed into one of Ubisoft's most important assets.

"WATCH DOGS 2 WILL LOOK LIKE SHIT"

Of course, it doesn't end there. Look past all of the studio's fantastic work in triple-A space and you'll see Reflection's most exciting aspect emerging in the ten-person indie team responsible for *Grow Up*. "The third strand of Reflections is the smallest, tiniest thing ever. It's a mini-incubator that released *Grow Home* and *Grow Up*, and more in the future. It's a very special culture in this incubator, but it is bleeding out onto the others; there's a nice relationship between the three [core] teams, all under this one studio."

Jacquey is quick to emphasise how integral the culture of Reflections has become to enhance the games it is creating. She describes how the office has been structured in such a way that if you aren't working on something you're passionate about, there is always scope to move onto a different project – but that's the great thing about Ubisoft, we suppose, there is always another game in the pipeline.

"Everybody that is working on *The Division* just loves it. They want to work on *The Division*; but if they don't want to, then yeah, actually, we can discuss and see if they can work on something quite different. You can move in [to the mini-incubator] and then you can go back to triple-A. There's something interesting here in terms of personal and career development."

It's impossible to spend time at Reflections and walk out of the door with the same impression that you walked in with. It's a studio that confronted storied past and emerged all the stronger. It has quietly assisted creation in some of the biggest videogames in the industry while planting seeds of growth for its future.

But that's been Reflections for three decades, a studio with a hunger to innovate and a desire to strive for more. For Jacquey, she knows her work at Reflections isn't over yet, not by a long shot. "26 years ago, games like *Shadow Of The Beast* and *Brian The Lion* were the top technical edge, incredible artistic achievements. If we project ourselves 26 years into the future from now, *Watch Dogs 2* will look like shit," she says, laughing. "It's just incredible the leaps that we are making… I can't even imagine what games will look like in 20 years."



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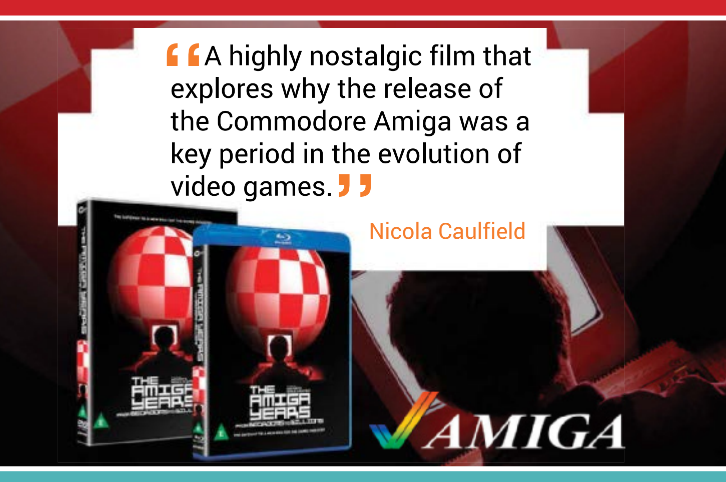
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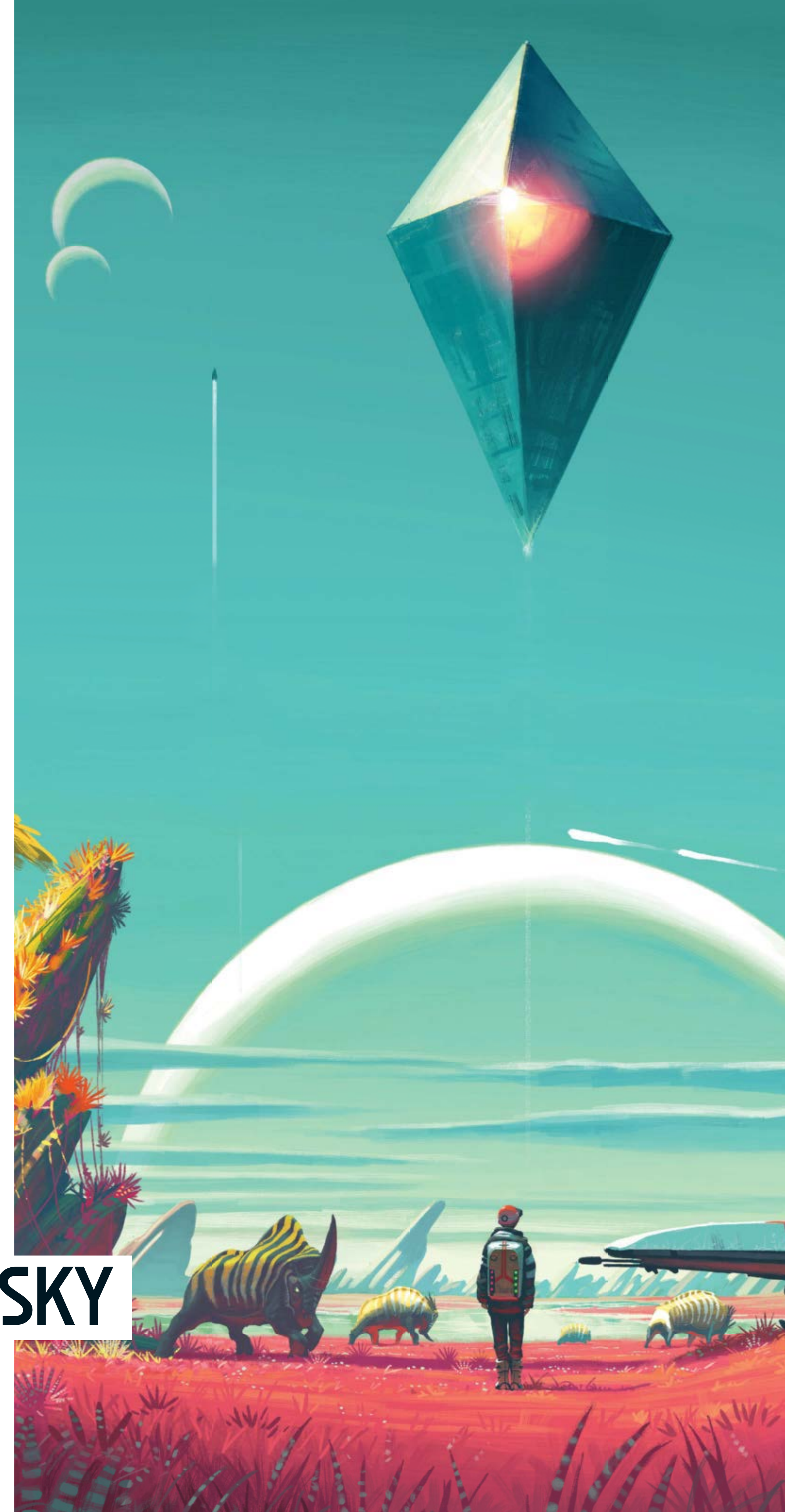


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Reviews



66

NO MAN'S SKY

Did Hello Games' procedural universe live up to the hype?



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.













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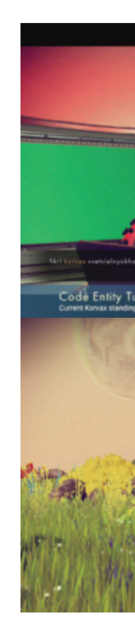

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THERE IS AN ELEMENT OF 'MY FIRST SPACE SIM' ABOUT SOME OF NO MAN'S SKY

PULP FICTION

Given the scope of the universe and the small team behind it, there's some sense in the idea that Hello Games would lean on written conversations and observations from your pilot as a means to tell the story of *No Man's Sky* over fully animated and voice-acted scenes. If you're not really into reading all of the book entries and intel from games like *The Witcher III*, *Mass Effect* or *Dragon Age* then this approach may not appeal to you, but we really enjoyed some of the surrealist, pulpy sci-fi descriptions in the game. Interacting with alien monoliths in particular leads to descriptions of strange hallucinations and tests of understanding of the aliens you've met.







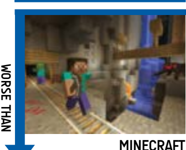
BEING FIRST AT ANY COST IS NOT ALWAYS THE POINT

No Man's Sky

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Hello Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AS GOOD AS
ELITE DANGEROUS



WORSE THAN
MINECRAFT

There's a certain frontier spirit that's required to fully enjoy *No Man's Sky.* It's easy enough to appreciate its technical accomplishments. You can step back and admire the incredible feat of engineering and conceptual design that it took for a relatively small team to make something so immense. But scale is not a measure of quality on its own, so it's important to try and step even further away than that to see what more *No Man's Sky* can provide. The answer is plenty, so long as you're happy to take your time.

No Man's Sky is a game that feels filled with possibility, even if really there are only a limited list of activities for you to pursue. The literal scale of the game, though, means that even these relatively repetitive pastimes can deliver varied loops of experience as tasks take on a different flavour depending on the environment or species you are dealing with. It remains throughout a game that leans heavily on inventory management, so if that's something that typically bores you to sleep, you're not going to get on with it here. Every reasonable measure of progress through the game is about upgrades to your inventory, whether that be additional slots on your Exosuit, Starship or Multi-tool, as you gradually earn more space for upgrades and holding items. If you can embrace that mechanic you're halfway to getting the best experience from the game.

As we got deeper and deeper into Hello Games' procedurally generated universe we searched for points of reference and comparison that would help to describe what it feels like to play *No Man's Sky.* It seems only natural to reach for space exploration experiences like *Elite Dangerous*, but this is tonally very different and in terms of gameplay far less structured. There is an element of 'my first space sim' about some of *No Man's Sky.* If you attempt to hold it up to the likes of *Elite* or *EVE Online*, it clearly isn't as robust or complex. It definitely isn't as demanding. But its relative ease and simplicity is a blessing, not a limitation.

No Man's Sky is approachable. Perhaps even more importantly, it is a relatively calm and inviting universe with which to engage. There's an inclusiveness to this experience that isn't going to throw players off if they've never played a space sim before, and if you have there should be enough in terms of discovery and crafting to keep you moving along. With this in mind the most comfortable comparison is likely to be *Minecraft*, a game that is similarly welcoming and open, was built by a small team with procedural generation at its heart, and is about survival gameplay, crafting and gradually creating your own targets for achievement as you grow ever braver and bolder in what you hope to achieve.

What it obviously lacks over *Minecraft* is the limitless creativity that Mojang's creation offered and has continued to develop from the start. But what it replaces it with is limitless discovery. A seemingly never-ending universe of planets, creatures, plants and landscapes. If you can allow yourself to be captivated and elated by each of these discoveries, to find joy in your role as zoological adventurer, then *No Man's Sky* offers some wonderful moments. That substitution of exploration for creativity is not like for like by any means, and discovery lacks the full depth of possibility that construction does, but it's not without its appeal.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

ALWAYS SOMETHING NEW: *No Man's Sky* never stops offering you a new distraction or something surprising. The way in which its procedural generation works means you can find some utterly bizarre things out in the wild.

Given the scope and freedom of the *No Man's Sky* experience you're more or less free to take and do what you want within the world, specialising in particular exploration types (underwater for instance, or on planets with heavily hostile atmospheres of one kind or another), but there are limitations to this too. We were curious to see how the game would reward or encourage different styles of play, such as being a trader or pirate for instance. The fact is that you have the freedom to play out such a role, but *No Man's Sky* doesn't really offer any firm support to such self-categorisation.

You earn in-game titles and levels for completing different kinds of tasks like learning alien languages, taking out sentinels or surviving on hostile worlds, but these are



Left: Dialogue options will open up to you depending on different items you have available, your standing with each alien species and what information you've managed to gather out in the world.

Left: The bright colour scheme of *No Man's Sky* could have become jarring over time, but while its neon skies are sometimes very strange, the overall atmosphere remains constant and it just enhances the otherworldliness of the experience.

not specialisations so much as simple milestones. How you choose to interpret or value those monikers is up to you. Chasing these milestones does have wider value as you follow certain paths in the game, so they're worth looking into every now and again. Getting to know each of the alien races in the game opens up unique dialogue options, for instance.

Which brings us to a rather important element of our *No Man's Sky* playing experience and something that took us a while to properly parse. The opening 30 minutes or so as you gather resources and slowly prepare yourself to head out into the stars can feel a little daunting and slow. It could lead you to worry that this is a pretty heavy survival title, but that only lasts for a short while. Out among the stars we took time to visit every planet and moon, scanning plants, rock formations and wildlife, taking it all in. We didn't really want to leave anywhere without feeling that we had taken a good chunk out of what it could offer us. It meant we were spending somewhere between an hour or two in each system.

Then we began to knuckle down a little on the Atlas path, the closest thing *No Man's Sky* offers to a narrative line for the game. As its mysteries and discoveries began to unfold before us we felt driven and compelled to push on faster and faster. The promise of rewards and some form of cathartic conclusion to *No Man's Sky* was too enticing to pass up and we began to skip through systems, staying long enough only to recharge engines, craft fuel and name locations before moving on. Our trained gamer instincts made this feel right. 'This is how games are played', we thought. But it dawned on us after 30 or so warp jumps that some of the fun of *No Man's Sky* was beginning to disappear. The repetition and mundanity of the loops of gameplay, finding the same resources over and over and over to warp to the next location began to drag us down a little. The promise of discovery and of unlocking some hidden secret was intoxicating, but it gradually began to dawn on us that it could only end anticlimactically.

The trouble is that as beguiling as the Atlas path is, it is not a fully fleshed out and robust narrative tale. It is another curiosity among many (perhaps the greatest one in the game), but it should not be the sole purpose of your time in this universe. It was only once we allowed ourselves to meander and wander again, gradually finding our way to key locations marked on our star map that some of the original flow and fun of the game returned. *No Man's Sky* is a game to get lost in for the sake of getting lost. Charging towards the centre at all costs or chasing the Atlas path at the expense of all other discoveries is a hollow way to play. The repetition and grind of the game that might otherwise be broken up by other distractions and smaller objectives, becomes dry and methodical when taken in isolation.

In this respect *No Man's Sky* has much in common with many traditional sandbox experiences. It does not necessarily excel in any particular gameplay field, but it manages to combine a great many to a relatively high standard that the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts. Take half an hour to become a botanist. Spend some time trading with Gek on a space station, taking advantage of the insane price you can get for Emeril at the Galactic Trade Terminal. Gradually fix up and fly off with every crashed ship you can find so that you get more and more room for upgrades and cargo without

FAQs

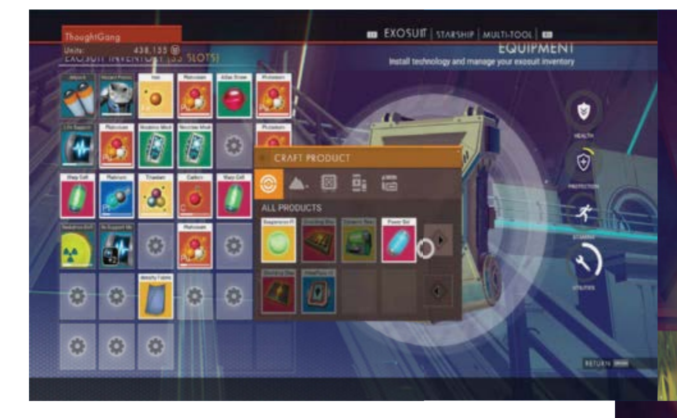
Q. IS THERE MULTIPLAYER?
No. Maybe? Possibly not at launch. It's so hard to say. The universe is shared, but not simultaneously inhabited.

Q. IS THERE AN END GAME?
Yes, you should head for the centre of the universe, but we wouldn't rush it.

Q. IS THERE ACTUALLY ANYTHING TO DO?
Yes, absolutely. If you enjoy the act of crafting, searching and discovering things then *NMS* will keep delivering.



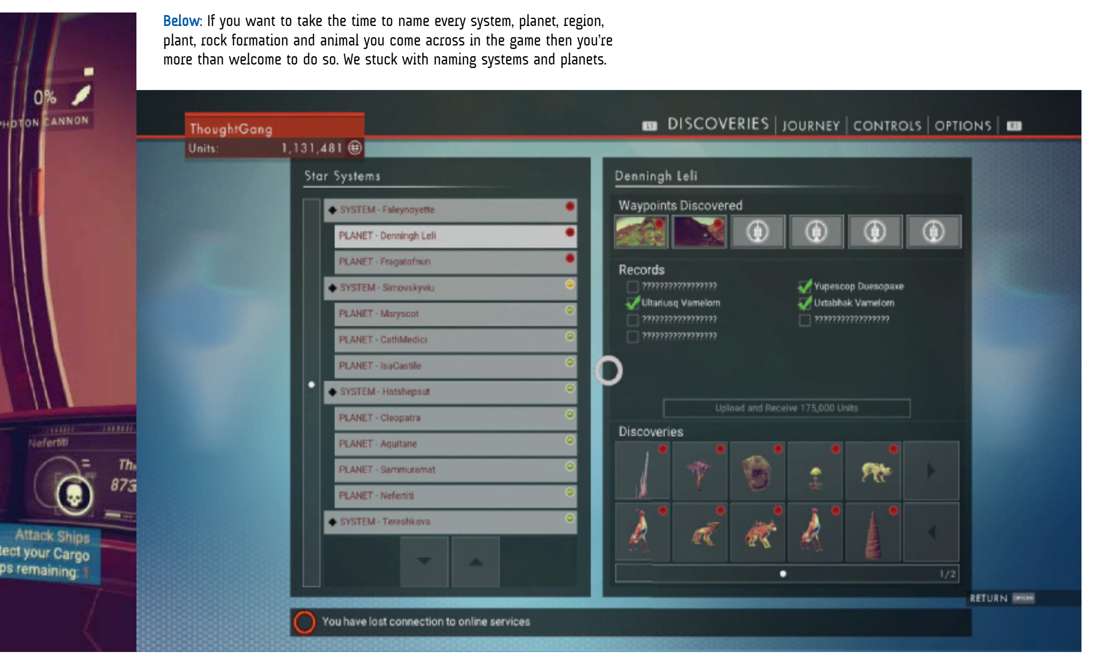
Right: Space combat is pretty exciting and one of the few emergent distractions you can enjoy between planets. Pirates are easy enough to fend off, but bounties and distress calls tend to be tougher.

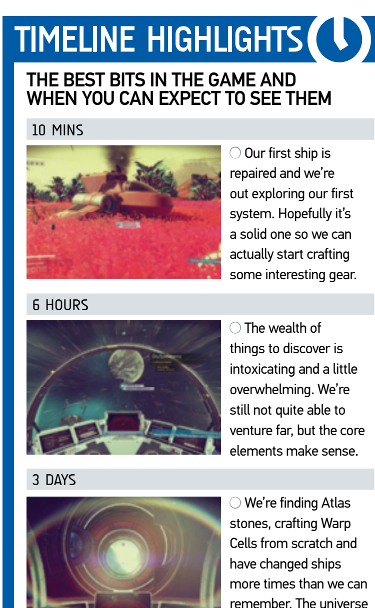


Above: Investing in inventory slots for your Exosuit, ship and Multi-tool are really your key markers of progress and enhancement through the game.



Below: If you want to take the time to name every system, planet, region, plant, rock formation and animal you come across in the game then you're more than welcome to do so. We stuck with naming systems and planets.







LACK OF ONLINE

It didn't take long for two players to manage to find each other in *No Man's Sky*, even though Hello Games was convinced it was a statistically improbable event. As it turned out, even though they occupied the same space, they couldn't actually see or interact with each other. While Hello Games has been clear all along that this was not a multiplayer experience in the traditional sense, many seemed to be hoping for some level of online connection between players in-game. As we go to press it's still not entirely clear how that might play out, but some social interaction seems likely even if it takes an update to implement. Expect *No Man's Sky* to be a solo affair if you are only just about to get involved.



spending a penny. Take on bounties as they appear in your system or take up the challenge of distress signals as rogue ships attack freighters. Just play and exist and take in the majesty of what Hello Games has crafted.

Because, as we've said, *No Man's Sky* is a wonderfully inviting experience. Everything about the game seems built for relative ease of use and simplicity's sake. That can sometimes mean that there's a lack of depth where you might have expected some, such as some of the more limited conversation you can find yourself in, some of the repetition of certain alien encounters over time and so on. But the way in which your Starship handles, naturally dodging the obstacles on a planet's surface, slowing down from full boost as you approach a space station and slowing down too as you enter the atmosphere of a planet makes things so much easier. Aiming and shooting is fairly forgiving in terms of accuracy too, although you do need to shoot ahead of ships in space if you want to hit them.

So, what's lacking from *No Man's Sky*? Really just a little room for player self-expression, akin but not necessarily on the same scale as a title like *Minecraft*. While *No Man's Sky* has many of the trappings of a pure survival game, it is not really one right down to its roots. It is a game about discovery and finding your own path. You decide on your priorities and play accordingly.

We understand that base-building is on the way in a future update, which makes a lot of sense. From there those survival traits in the game can be expanded on and perhaps a more driven mission structure could be introduced. While we wouldn't want to be caught asking for fetch quests, something of this type from time to time wouldn't have been the worst thing to see in *No Man's Sky*. And of course the multiplayer side of the game that many hoped for could still be introduced in some form. Right now the shared universe is one only of shared discoveries, not worlds that you can actually meet up in.

Ultimately, the way you play *No Man's Sky* is going to have as much of an impact on how much you enjoy it as the quality of the game itself. Hello Games has talked about this being a 'chill' game and has questioned whether it should have made heading to the centre of the universe an objective at all since it distracts from the more fulfilling approach of simply being and existing in this world. If the old adage that the journey rather than the destination is what has worth holds true for you then you should find much to admire.

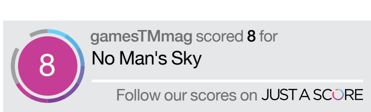
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SELF EXPRESSION: While there are countless ship variations and just as many Multi-tool variants to find, there's no direct means of expressing your identity in the game. Even a small decal tool for ships might have been a nice touch.

VERDICT

AT ITS BEST WHEN ENJOYED AIMLESSLY



WHERE THERE'S A WILL, THERE'S A VENT

Deus Ex: Mankind Divided

Deus Ex: Mankind Divided is a mess of conflicting ideas and themes, of ageing mechanics and messy iteration. For better or worse, it is blindly beholden to many of the flaws that we can now identify games exhibited back in 2011; the success of *Human Revolution* casts a long shadow over Adam Jensen's unspectacular return. Dare we even say it… *we didn't ask for this.*

Eidos Montreal has attempted to evolve *Deus Ex* into a careful meditation on transhumanism, though it has attempted to do so without leaving some of its more ridiculous concepts behind. You are Adam Jensen, an augmented taskforce operative now living as a second-class citizen. Thrust into a society that bemoans your very existence, not because of anything that you've done but because of the metallic parts beneath your skin. Angst has been exchanged for ammunition in this fight against corporate entities, each warring to decide the future of the augmented for mutual gain.

Also, you can fire huge swords from your arms. Oh, and launch bombs from your body and you can coat your skin in bullet proof armour – pausing only to let your batteries recharge – but still we're expected to run scared from security checkpoints and the racist police patrolling the streets of Prague. There are serious tonal inconsistencies all throughout *Mankind Divided* like this; they only serve to further throw the spotlight onto its many flaws and missed opportunities.

Eidos Montreal clearly believes it could balance these tonal tensions appropriately, but the truth is it fails to navigate them with any sort of finesse, charm or clear statement of intent. At times the chasm between serious social commentary and pulpy speculative fiction can be so wide that it feel like a master class in self-parody. So clever does it obviously believe itself to be, *Mankind Divided* offers little in the way of nuance – like it feels that it's above it – and that's a problem when the entire premise is an allegory for the racism and oppression that still lingers in our society.

The studio clearly wanted to push players out of their comfort zones, but it has failed to combine that desire intelligently with the idiotic spectacle that naturally embodies a triple-A videogame production. Most of the time *Mankind Divided*'s navigation of totalitarianism is a heavy-handed distraction that's bereft of logic, while at other times it risks being outright disrespectful to the very issues it is attempting to explore and expose.

On the surface, *Mankind Divided* presents itself as the *adult* alternative to the litany of mindless shooters out there in the market. Though the reality is that it feels lost within its own ideas, pumping as many 'grown up' themes into its structure for the sake of being different: "*Listen*," the game shouts, scrunching up its metaphorical face and stomping its feet, "videogames *can* be taken seriously too, don't you know!"

They can, but *Deus Ex* clearly isn't the game to do it. Most of *Mankind Divided* takes place in Prague circa 2029, two years after the events of *Human Revolution*, which concluded with the augs engaging in a killing spree after having their advanced implants and prosthetics hacked. If you have an enhancement to your body, you are public enemy number one – stripped of basic human rights and in constant danger of being shipped to aug slum Golem City or receiving a bullet to the head. Though it's difficult to feel threatened when you're embodying Adam Jensen, a character that could reasonably topple a small army before letting rip with a sardonic quip.

Eidos Montreal seems to have encountered many of the same problems that it faced with when it tried to drag *Thief* (2014) kicking and screaming into the current generation. It became lost in the dreary haze of heightened fan expectation and pressured execution;

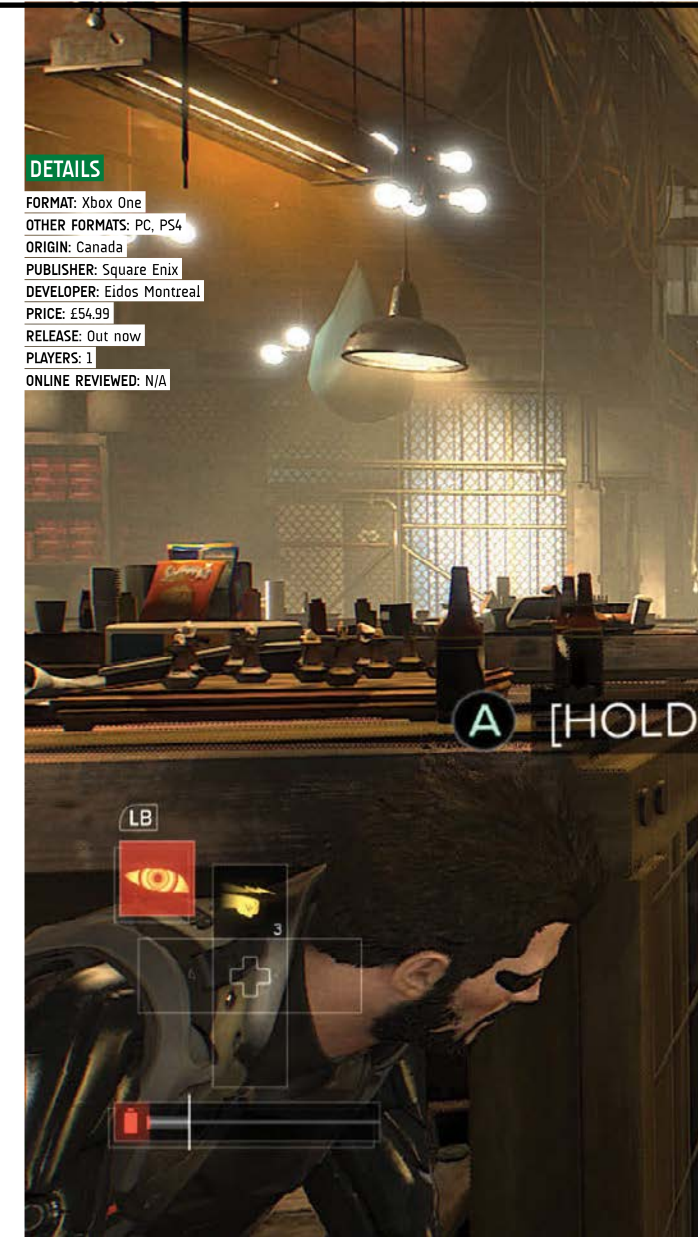
SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

STEALTH ACTION: *Mankind Divided* is at its best when you can operate as a ghost, switching to pure action as soon as it all hits the fan.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS4
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: Eidos Montreal
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Above: *Mankind Divided* shows flashes of greatness, though it ultimately fails to capture the attention with its lack-lustre plot and familiar mechanics.

BETTER THAN

THIEF



WORSE THAN



DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION



Above: *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* attempts to tell a very adult and poignant story, exploring themes of racism and segregation from our own world. Sadly, it does so in a heavy-handed – almost haphazard – fashion that ultimately disappoints.

THE IDEA THAT DEUS EX HAS COME TO TAKE ITSELF SO SERIOUSLY ALMOST BORDERS ON PARODY AT TIMES



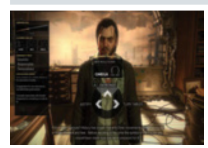
BREACH MODE

In addition to the main campaign, *Mankind Divided* also comes with a secondary mode called Breach. Here you'll find one of *Deus Ex*'s headier virtual reality concepts explored in greater depths as you move through stages designed up as complex puzzles. You are tasked with hacking and downloading data from storage nodes as quickly as possible to earn a high score, with stealth, combat and strong environmental-navigation all playing into your final result. At the conclusion of a stage you'll earn yourself a pack of cards that contain upgrades that'll better assist your next timed run. It's a fun secondary mode that actually provides a great deal of extension to your time with the game, long after the credits have rolled.

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

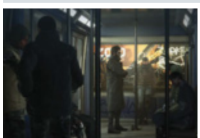
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

12 MINS



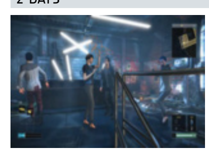
Want a reminder of how convoluted the plot was to *Human Revolution*? Well, *Mankind Divided* kicks off with a 12-minute plot summery of augmented angst and Illuminati nonsense.

10 HOURS

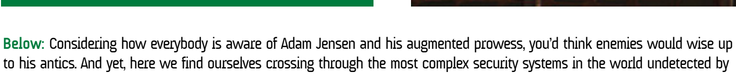


You're in Aug hell, Golem City. Its stunning visuals are hardly matched by the gameplay though; a slow crawl through groups of NPCs towards activist Talos Rucker.

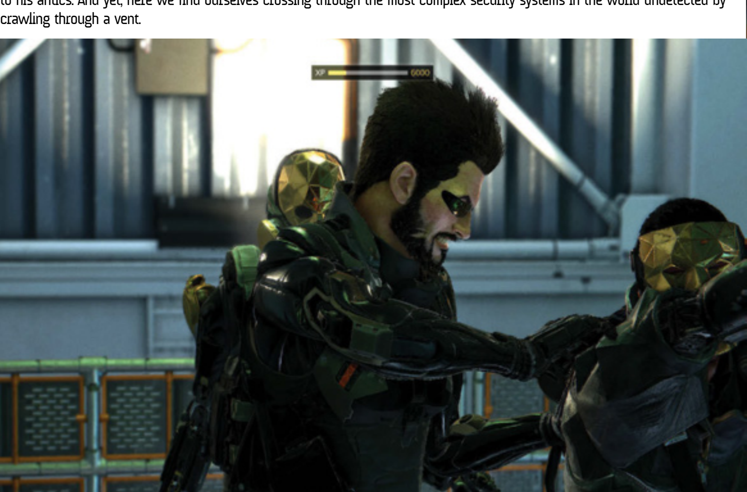
2 DAYS



And you're done. The story ended without any solid conclusion and now you're wondering whether you missed something. Don't worry, you didn't, like everything in life it just ends.



Below: Considering how everybody is aware of Adam Jensen and his augmented prowess, you'd think enemies would wise up to his antics. And yet, here we find ourselves crossing through the most complex security systems in the world undetected by crawling through a vent.

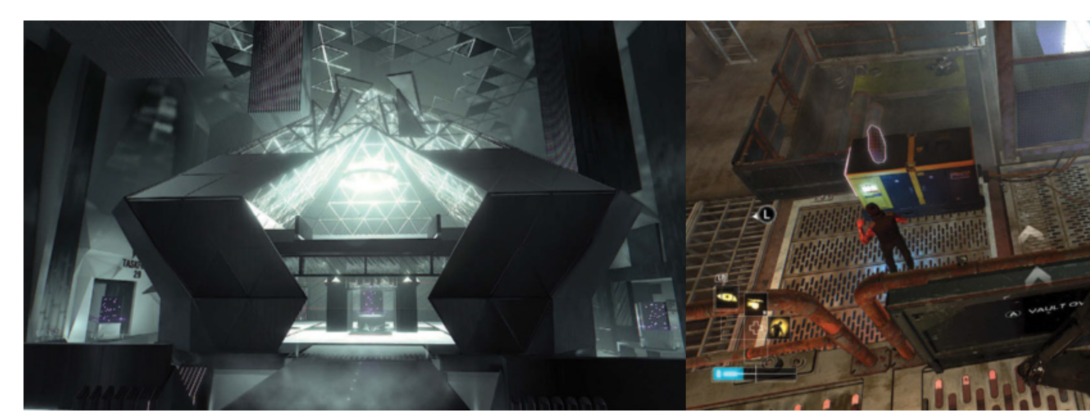


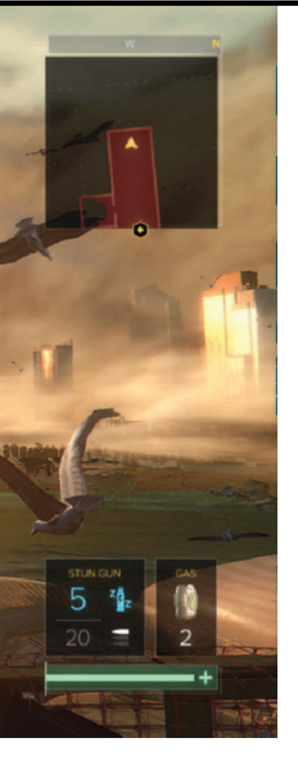


Above: The Prague main hub is interesting to explore, with fun side-quests to be discovered, but it feels empty. There just isn't enough life in the streets to make it believable.

Glitch in the system

Mankind Divided is proof that, sometimes, a day one patch isn't enough. The game displays numerous technical faults on Xbox One, some an annoyance and others having direct influence on gameplay. Chief among these are routine framerate drops whenever you are moving through the Prague hub and whenever gunfights get a little on the monstrous side. Also expect to see NPCs and enemies clipping into the environment, infrequent hard crashes and a great deal of texture pop in. The load times between booting a game save or area transition are also be insufferably long. The optimisation could have been a lot stronger on the console version of *Mankind Divided* – though the PC version doesn't suffer as badly, so long as your machine is up to the task.



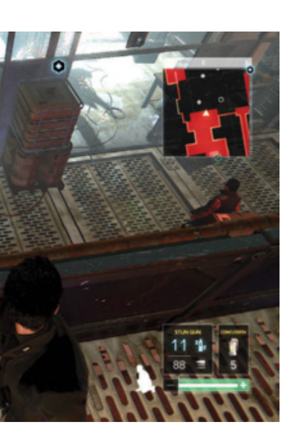


FAQs

Q. HUMAN REVOLUTION REQUIRED?
You'll need to have played *Human Revolution* to get a sense of the world. Many characters and game systems are never given even the simplest explanation.

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
Were you to simply blast your way through the main story, you could wrap it up in around 30 hours.

Q. MORE OF THE SAME?
Mankind Divided is just more of the same. The problem is, many aspects of *Human Revolution* have dated poorly in the last five years.



the result was a messy, haphazard release that had all of the puzzle pieces required to appease fans and give the franchise an incredible return, but failed to piece them together in an enjoyable fashion.

Mankind Divided suffers in a similar way, never quite finding its feet but doing enough to appease your memory of what's come before it. All of the elements are there for an enjoyable adventure, but it spends too long contradicting its own rules and leaning on mechanics rooted heavily in the past. From the moment the game whirs into action to the moment it stumbles to an abrupt, jarring conclusion some 40-hours later, it constantly seemed as if it was pandering to someone.

There are no doubt a good few *Human Revolution* fans out there that are only interested in the gameplay – eagerly looking forward to skipping through the poorly animated cut scenes and banter to get to what that game did best: stealth-action and invasions of privacy.

Sadly, *Mankind Divided* handles like a game that should have been released in 2011. It plays as *Human Revolution* does now, *not*, critically, as you remember it to. There's a big distinction there, because for better or for worse, all of the problems that existed in genre games five years ago can be seen replicated here. Everything about its core design is dated by the huge advancements rival developers have made in the stealth-action space, let alone the RPG genre.

Handling weapons and your augmentations in first-person is a chore complicated by an array of terrible control configurations; the simplest acts – from inventory management, to weapon customisation to holstering your weapon – are unnecessarily complex. The third-person cover mechanics are clunky and outdated, while hacking is as middling as it ever was. *Mankind Divided* is merely competent in everything it does, with the uneven narrative cohesion occasionally rearing its head to pile even more poorly scripted melodrama onto your plate.

The studio has made an attempt to introduce new augmentations to the fold, though they are little more than fancy parlour tricks compared to the returning powers from *Human Revolution*. The standard augs range from increased strength and temporary invisibility to tools to better assist you in winning debates or masking the sound of your footsteps. The aug tree is once again fantastic for helping you to define your own play style, especially when combined with the array of lethal and non-lethal weapons that can be found out in the world.

As cool as many of the new augs sound – such as the ability to hack things from afar or fire concussive rounds out of your hands – they don't have a fundamental impact on play, acting as little more than a glorified gameplay gimmick. That's because Eidos Montreal has packed all of these cool looking toys into a bland and surprisingly dull playground.

The missions blur together, a haze of repeated character models, assets and vent navigation. You'll of course spend most of your time navigating a complex web of corridors, avoiding a sea of enemies to either get your hands on an item of interest or engage in conversation with a pantomime villain, stopping occasionally on the way to hack into henchman number 12's email account.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

GENRE INNOVATION: *Mankind Divided* seems quite happy to lift the gameplay mechanics and systems of its predecessor and simply re-tune it for an all-new game.

You're probably thinking that this sounds like classic *Deus Ex* and it is, in theory. In reality, it rarely ramps up enough to challenge. *Mankind Divided* never compels you to switch up your play style or to search for more efficient routes through the hostile territory as its predecessor did so successfully. Most areas are only lightly populated with guards or threats and so the intensity never really ramps up to a satisfying pace, even on the higher difficulty settings.

Worse still, should you get caught or trigger an alarm the AI is surprisingly poor. The alert routine for a group of enemies will often see a guard check behind one crate but ignore the ones adjacent to it before trundling off in the other direction, giving Jensen plenty of time to crawl into a vent and disappear. Should you trigger a full-scale alarm, the guards will have no qualms rushing the same position one after the other until they are all dead or otherwise incapacitated. We encountered one situation where, after a particularly brutal shootout, *so many* tranquillised bodies were piled up in a single doorway that the game crashed as we tried to wade through it all to continue to our target destination.

Ultimately, there's nothing as enjoyable or reliable in *Mankind Divided* as the basic stealth techniques. It won't feel particularly fresh or overly enjoyable, but it's here where the game plays to its strengths. One rare height – a bank heist that's actually completely avoidable should you make a wrong decision along the way – has you leaning on basic augmentations, stealth takedowns and cautious timing to move through a heavily guarded installation; it's here where *Mankind Divided*'s true potential briefly rears its head.

No matter how creaky the mechanics and systems may be, player navigation and discovery is still one of the defining aspects of the experience. In fact, the Prague area – an entirely open hub that serves as the scenery for a lot of your adventure – will provide some of the most fun.

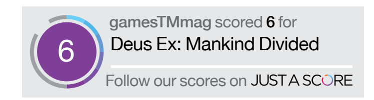
Despite feeling like an empty shell – set dressing that's devoid of life in the streets or any real buzz that you'd expect from a thriving, oppressed city – it does offer a healthy dose of side-quests if you're willing to search them out. These diversions are interesting vignettes in an otherwise uninteresting story. Looting random homes, sifting through their emails and using your augmented powers to invade everything from underground news organisations to sparsely populated raves was a welcome distraction from the mundanity to be found elsewhere.

Mankind Divided never feels confident enough to take a risk in the places that matter – utterly beholden to *Human Revolution*. It's more of the same, but that isn't necessarily a good thing. Everything feels like it has been wrapped in a layer of unnecessary complication, while the addition of new augmentations a desperate attempt to shove something new into Jensen's toolbox of a body.

To think, elements such as the writing, animations and voice acting – that its predecessor was so celebrated for – actively hold *Mankind Divided* back, though so do the disappointingly stifled weapon and cover mechanics. Here's a game that hits its stride when dealing with the basics, crawling through vents and moving dumpsters to scale security fences, but struggles with just about everything else. The elements for a classic entry are here, but you can see the studios' hesitation painted all of the end product.

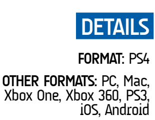
Barrelling through a 40-hour campaign with little connection to the world, its characters or their struggle is difficult. The narrative gets in the way, with the world-building and setup never quite landing in the way the studio expected it would – it becomes a distraction, with the message (if indeed there was one to be made) never quite cutting through the nonsense that also exists in this world. Eidos Montreal needed to build on the success of *Human Revolution*, instead of merely trying to replicate it wrapped in difficult politics. Instead of being the revolution we so hoped it would be, it's simply left us divided.

VERDICT
A COMPETENT BUT ULTIMATELY CONFUSED RETURN



GET BUSY SHIVVING, GET BUSY BUYING

Prison Architect



DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Mac, Xbox One, Xbox 360, PS3, iOS, Android
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Double Eleven
DEVELOPER: Introversion Software
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

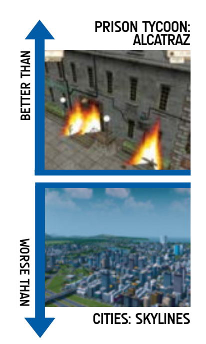
Endlessly unappreciated and constantly bungled, the videogame tutorial is one of the few areas of game design that persistently manages to shirk innovation. A clever tutorial can bolster a mediocre game and a clumsy one can distance you from a masterpiece, but even the greatest studios in the world persistently fail to explore beyond boilerplate bouts of monkey see, monkey do. *Prison Architect*'s tutorial is a clear-cut masterpiece because it uses a brusque narrative to disguise a totally unpalatable bombardment of information.

Make no mistake though, the stories in the "Prison Stories" tutorial mode are the oldest chestnuts in the world: the murderous husband on death row after catching his wife and lover in flagrante; the splintering of a disloyal mafioso family; the feud between a good-hearted doctor and an embittered prison guard. This surfeit of originality is never detrimental simply because a knowing and off-kilter tone is established quickly, and pivotal scenes are often comprised of just three or four curt exchanges. But as this hackneyed old yarn winds to a close, you realise that you've had a sophisticated jungle of systems pushed into your head without you even realising.

The finer details of actually building your own prison from scratch are left for you to discover, although you won't need many pointers if you take advantage of good old common sense: multiple doors prevent choke-points (and thus unnecessary drama), it's always worth tapping those payphones, your admin staff don't need much space, and so on. Once you're up and running, the whole experience becomes a three-way war of attrition between yourself, your bosses and the population of your lock-up. Managing your budget is always of primary importance because you're paid per prisoner, per day. Run a small, open jailhouse for a little while, replete with rehab programs and a fully furnished common room, and you'll soon start believing that you can bring in more volatile prisoners, who in turn net you more cash.

Managing these transactions is where the game really tests you, because a single poorly managed lunch or ill-equipped washroom is enough to browbeat the really bad apples into instigating a riot, and before long you're building sniper towers, lining every inch of the place with CCTV cameras and issuing daily cell shakedowns. How far down that path you go is up to you, because unlike in most games of this kind, your population is captive and can't just up and move. What's more, you're almost never punished for your decisions, regardless of how callous they might be.

Navigation on the PS4 port might be slightly wonky, but you get used to it. This is a crazily thorough and thoughtful management sim; slick and surprising enough to recommend regardless of format.





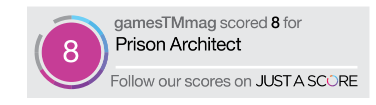
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

GET OUT: Unlike in most management sims, you can actually turn the tables and play as a peon in *Prison Architect*'s Escape mode. It's limited, but user-made DLC adds plenty of longevity.

VERDICT

SMART, THOUGHT-PROVOKING AND UNIQUELY COMPELLING







Right: Much of the game's odd humour is delivered by the tutorial's first CEO, a stern bureaucrat who talks very frankly about things like prisoner executions and drug abuse, while also randomly peppering conversations with Alan Partridge-isms like, "Butter my arse!"

CLASSIC WORMS, WITH A FEW ADDED TWISTS

Worms W.M.D

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Team17
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-6
ONLINE REVIEWED: NO

BETTER THAN: WORMS BATTLEGROUNDS

WORSE THAN: WORMS 2: ARMAGEDDON

Save for its odd venture into 3D, the Worms series has almost always stuck to its miniature guns and offered up a soil-scented, turn-based shindig that's barely changed since the original *Worms* back in 1995. For most franchises this would be a problem, but Team17 knows exactly what makes its most recognisable licence tick, so every new addition made to its latest incarnation, *Worms W.M.D*, never gets in the way of the simple pleasure of blowing up smart-mouthed invertebrates with a bazooka.

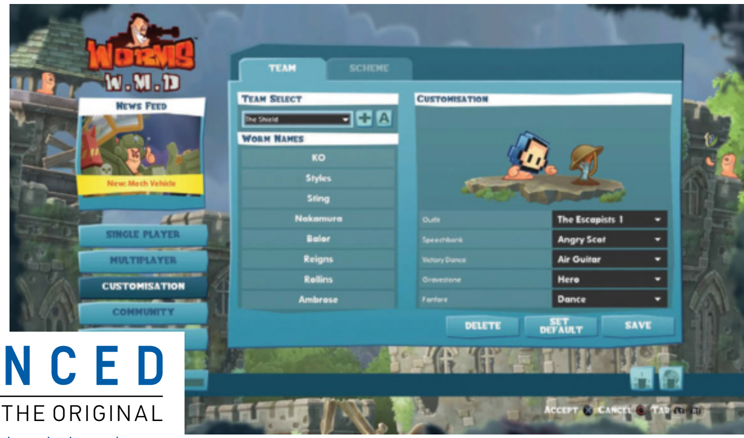
If you're new to the comical death-dealing world of Worms (honestly, where have you been? The series is available on practically every platform that's ever been), the game is 2D, turn-based affair where you control a team of - you guessed it - worms. With a small armoury of weapons at your disposal (ranging from the classic bazooka all the way to a tank, which we'll roll onto shortly), the objective is simple: kill the other team, rejoice, repeat. It might sound simple, and it kind of is, but it's just how you wipe out your opponents that makes all the difference. That creativity as you time a perfectly aimed grenade that bounces into the middle of poorly placed worms, setting off a series of mines and sending them to meet their limbless maker never gets old.

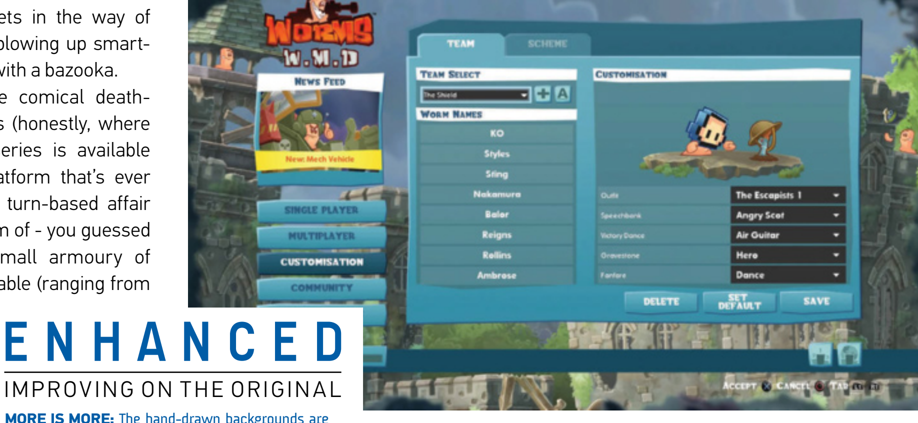
Those aforementioned changes might not revolutionise the classic formula, but they do add a new dimension to your campaign, local multiplayer or online matches. Now along with the usual weapons and power-ups, the game drops in a new crafting mechanic (come on, this is 2016, if it's not procedurally generated it's almost certainly got a crafting table). Yes, it's kitsch, but gathering resources around the map to upgrade weapons urges you to play your turns a little differently, manoeuvring in search of materials as much as you do for kills.

Each map also includes a handful of interiors for the first time, offering a new take on destructible cover. Again, it's not a game-changer that's going to put *Worms W.M.D* on the map, but it riffs on the age old template with a subtle yet satisfying nuance. Vehicles also make their series debut, offering another outlandish way to rain lead and death on your friends and enemies. From tanks to helicopters, these additions can really turn a bad game in your favour - oh, and you can make the tank jump as well. Have that, *Battlefield*.

Worms W.M.D captures all the things that make the series so much fun, especially in local multiplayer, and all those new bells and whistles certainly add a cute little twist, but you can't help but feel that this really is the same game you played last year, and the year before that, and the year before that... Still, if you're looking for a slice of classic multiplayer mayhem with a lick of current-gen paint, there are few better places to dust off that bazooka.

Above: Regardless of whether this is your first taste of *Worms*' unique recipe or one you've downed plenty of times before, nothing quite beats pummelling an enemy so badly they fly off the screen into the watery depths below.

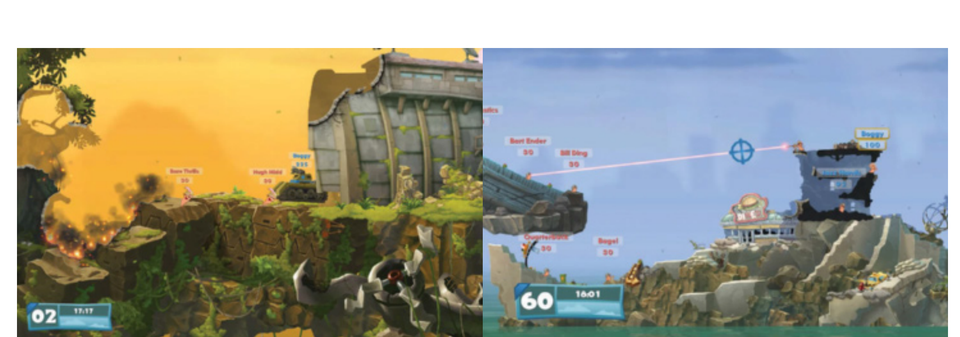




ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

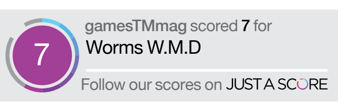
MORE IS MORE: The hand-drawn backgrounds are more eye-popping than ever, and the sheer level customisation (including *Rocket League* and *The Escapists*-themed items) is deeper than ever.



Above: Tanks! Actual tanks in a *Worms* game! It's a small touch, but adding in vehicles provides both an extra bit of power when it's your turn and a handy means of mobile cover if you're down to your very last worm.



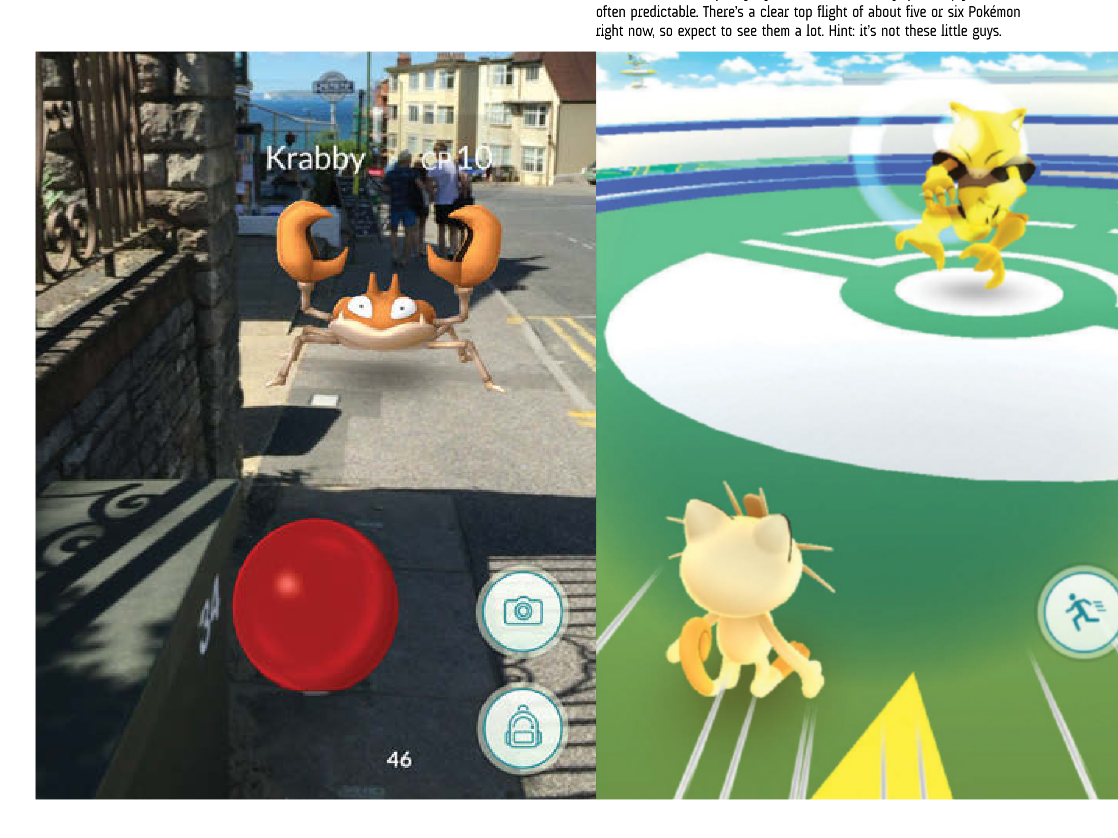
DON'T EXPECT TO SOIL YOURSELF WITH SURPRISE



WHAT? MOBILE GAMING IS EVOLVING!

Pokémon GO

Below: For their simplicity, Gym battles are actually quite enjoyable, if often predictable. There's a clear top flight of about five or six Pokémon right now, so expect to see them a lot. Hint: it's not these little guys.



Chances are you don't need us to tell you that *Pokémon Go* has already captured the imaginations of millions of players. The crowds of zombies using their phones as 21st century divining rods to find fictional creatures and shouting about how they've found a Swirlfrog or a Flappyfish have probably done a good enough job of that already. The dust has settled a little now and the early hysteria has died down, so while you might still see individuals or groups chasing digital monsters –not to be mistaken with Digimon – in the real world (if you can tear yourself away from your own phone screen for long enough, that is), the days of going to a popular public place only to find it teeming with phone users almost certainly there for the same Lured PokéStop that attracted you seem to have passed somewhat.

There are a number of reasons for this, not least the technical issues that continue to plague the game, though admittedly not to the same degree as those endured at launch. Player uptake was way higher than Niantic anticipated and the rollout too fast for servers to cope, causing all kinds of issues. Features that proved too much of a burden – from the pointless map of where a Pokémon was caught to the tracking system, which has already been through several iterations and continues to evolve – have since been dropped, although the damage has already been done in some cases, the temperamental app driving a portion of players away long before their journey to become Pokémon Masters ever really got started. Between improved servers (and the odd patch) and a player base that has levelled out, the game is in a better state today and major glitches and crashes are mercifully rare. While some abandoned their quest early, those at the other end of the spectrum account for another slice of player drop-off. While 151 Pokémon felt like loads to round up in the original games, those with the drive and/or luck to catch 'em all are already repeating technically complete Pokédexes – 142 is effectively the real total right now, since five legendary Pokémon, three of the four regional exclusives and Ditto are all unavailable, and the grind becomes real once you approach or hit a three-figure capture count.

In terms of mechanics, it must be said that it doesn't feel like Niantic really understands *Pokémon*. There are a bunch of curious design decisions, chiefly the way stats are calculated – this prioritises Attack over everything else, with Speed pretty much an afterthought, rendering some of the stars of the original generation like Gengar and Alakazam borderline useless (while the likes of Onix and Dugtrio are *actually* useless) and promoting chunky creatures like Snorlax, Lapras and Vaporeon to top-tier status. Move sets also present some odd possibilities, with limited pools crippling some Pokémon by only allowing them moves of different types rather than same-type attacks that receive a healthy damage bonus. Then there's the battling system.

We understand the need to simplify and speed up the methodical turn-based battles of the core series to cater to a mobile audience, but it still feels weird to go from one of the deepest and most complex combat systems in RPG gaming to a puddle-shallow system of taps and swipes. Imbalance between moves and types is just as bad as it is among the Pokémon and with no way to predict or alter moves, assembling a good team comes down to blind luck and perseverance rather than skill or knowledge – even the smartest player with a full working knowledge of behind-the-scenes systems such as Individual Values can lose a month of Candy farming by evolving a Gyarados that happens to learn Bite and Twister, which is basically worthless.

SEEING A WILD DRAGONITE POP UP HITS YOU WITH A ONE-TWO PUNCH OF EXCITEMENT AND NOSTALGIA

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
OTHER FORMATS: Android
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: The Pokémon Company
DEVELOPER: Niantic
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: MMO
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Despite its myriad issues, it's impossible to discuss *Go* purely on the basis of the app itself – the experiences the game facilitates are a good deal more memorable and fresh than such a basic and troubled piece of software should allow. Read around the game and you'll hear stories of players making friends, being involved in stampedes for rare Pokémon or even discovering new things that have been right under their noses for years while hunting, but actually go out and play and

LEVELLING UP

There are numerous features currently absent from the game that have been announced, suggested and teased, all of which should help improve the overall product. Trading is coming, and the same applies to distribution of legendaries. Battling other players is another thing on the 'still to come' list, and another way to train and earn XP would certainly be welcome, particularly if some of the core issues with Pokémon power and move viability can be addressed. There's also the small matter of the remaining 570 Pokémon, although this will probably be a slow, generational rollout – nostalgia for later generation is nowhere near as strong as for the original selection, although we can't wait to see new life injected into the game.

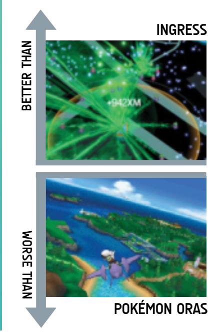
FAQs

Q. IS IT STILL BROKEN?
Broken? How long have you been away? Niantic's doing pretty well at fixing issues fast

Q. CAN I REALLY CATCH 'EM ALL?
With region exclusive Pokémon it might be tricky unless you travel a lot

Q. IS IT SAFE TO PLAY?
It's no less safe than texting as you walk. Be aware of your surroundings





Above: Players in rural areas might not have the same luxuries as those in urban areas – PokéStops tend to be rare, as do spawns, making progress a slog. **Right:** AR functionality is an amusing novelty, but it actually hurt things on a gameplay level. Pokémon are typically a little harder to catch, plus performance takes a serious hit when running the game on a weaker device

you'll see – or, better yet, experience – this for yourself.

It's captivating and compelling, the random nature of spawns meaning you never know when something amazing will pop up nearby, and the thrill of finding and catching the critter amid a crowd of equally enthusiastic Trainers is genuinely unparalleled. Enthusiasm is more than likely the key factor here, actually.

While *Go* is hardly the first game of its kind, its arsenal is stronger than anything similar. Seeing a wild Charizard or Dragonite pop up hits you with a one-two punch of excitement and nostalgia, the thrill of the hunt further fuelling the fervour before the elation of the catch caps off the passage of play beautifully… or you leave disappointed and empty-handed, the cheers of those who *were* lucky enough to make the catch salting the wounds even more. You'll get it next time. *Next time*. And so the loop continues, and does so until your patience with the game runs dry.

Improvements and additions over time – including the Raid-style events for catching legendary Pokémon, as teased in the original trailer – as well as ongoing tweaks to fundamental systems stand to improve *Pokémon Go* as a game, but the quality (and novelty) of the experience of playing, particularly as part of a group, is already there. *Go* could still one day be the legendary game its immense potential hints at.

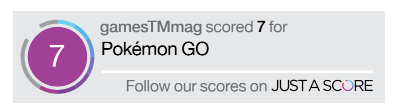
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WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

NEXT GENERATION: 151 creatures may have seemed like a lot 20 years ago, but it's amazing how quickly new additions to your Pokédex dry up after the first month or so of play. Additional Pokémon may alleviate this issue, so long as Niantic can come up with a smart way to integrate future generations with the original line-up.

VERDICT

FUNCTIONAL-AT-BEST SOFTWARE, BUT A SUPERB EXPERIENCE





A PROMISING BUT MUNDANE VR CONSPIRACY

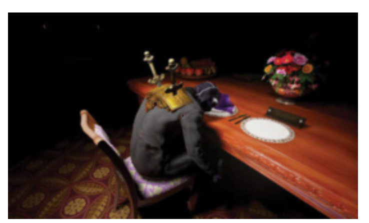
The Assembly

It's all so *Half-Life*. *The Assembly*'s premise is that there's a secret organisation somewhere beneath a desert where scientists work on projects of questionable morality. You play two scientists exploring this facility; Madeleine, a newly kidnapped recruit, and Cal, a jaded old hand, trying to get out. Oh, and it's designed for VR.

It certainly sets out to impress; that strong narrative thread takes you through an impressively large facility, which has been designed to be detailed and rich enough for VR.

Yet *The Assembly* has two major problems; first, that it's a better game without the VR systems that it was built for; and second, that the world, though sometimes presenting you with very smart puzzles, lacks internal logic and fizz over its short three-hour span.

Let's first take a closer look at why the game work better without VR. Much of the game is hidden object hunting, yet the various

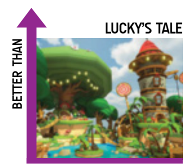


DETAILS

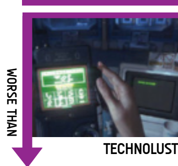
FORMAT: PC / Oculus Rift
OTHER FORMATS: PC / HTC Vive
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: nDreams
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Oculus Rift, Nvidia GTX 970 / AMD 290, 8GB Ram, Windows 7, 2 x USB 3 ports, HDMI 1.3 video output
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

LUCKY'S TALE



WORSE THAN



TECHNOLUST

VR movement systems, whilst innovative, are fiddly and unintuitive. While it's initially pleasing to look around the detailed environments, sometimes you just want to get across yet another lab without feeling motion sick or having your teleport route blocked by a pot plant. Within an hour, we'd turned the VR off.

Without VR, *The Assembly* reveals itself to be a somewhat-cheesy first-person adventure game, like a pacifist *System Shock 2*. Most of the game is spent as Cal, sifting through drawers, reading other people's emails, listening to their phone messages and talking to himself. For the most secure, high-tech facility on Earth, there's almost no security, which takes some suspension of disbelief.

You encounter few other people and only in scripted encounters. Even then, they're low-detail models wearing masks, presumably to save on facial animation. Add in average voice acting and a predictable script and Cal's sections feel rather rote.

Madeleine's moments are more impressive, as she runs through her various trials. These are puzzles in giant test chambers, ranging from a whodunnit to an epidemic simulator, all bashing you crudely about the limitations of morality. Even then, the pace is glacial, not helped by slow UI elements and that movement system. By contrast, her early sections are hugely immersion-breaking, where you're confined to an empty wheelchair or gurney being wheeled around.

As a videogame equivalent of a 1950s pulp science fiction short story, *The Assembly* works. But it's nowhere near as good a morality tale, or a virtual reality experience, as it needs to be in order to truly stand out.

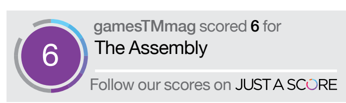
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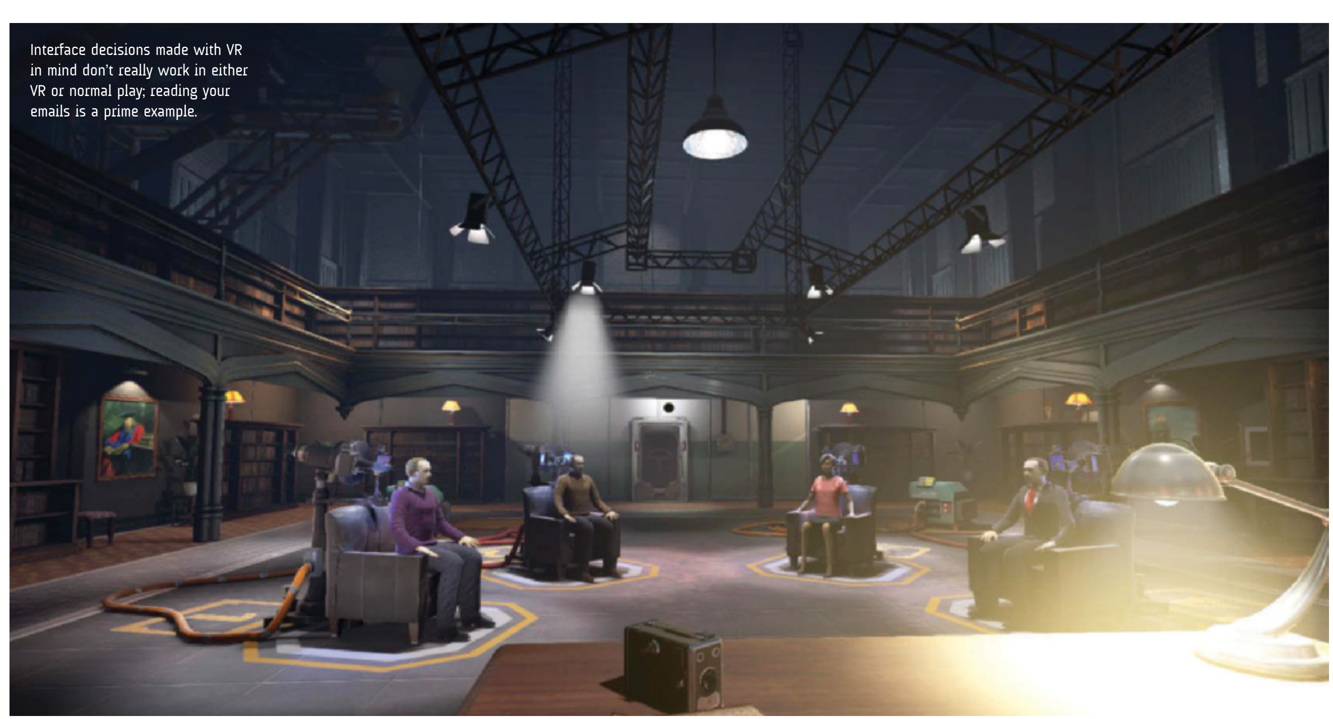
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SENSE OF SELF: What makes *The Assembly* work is the sense of embodiment – but here, several scenes (especially during the opening) are undermined by your lack of a body, especially in VR.

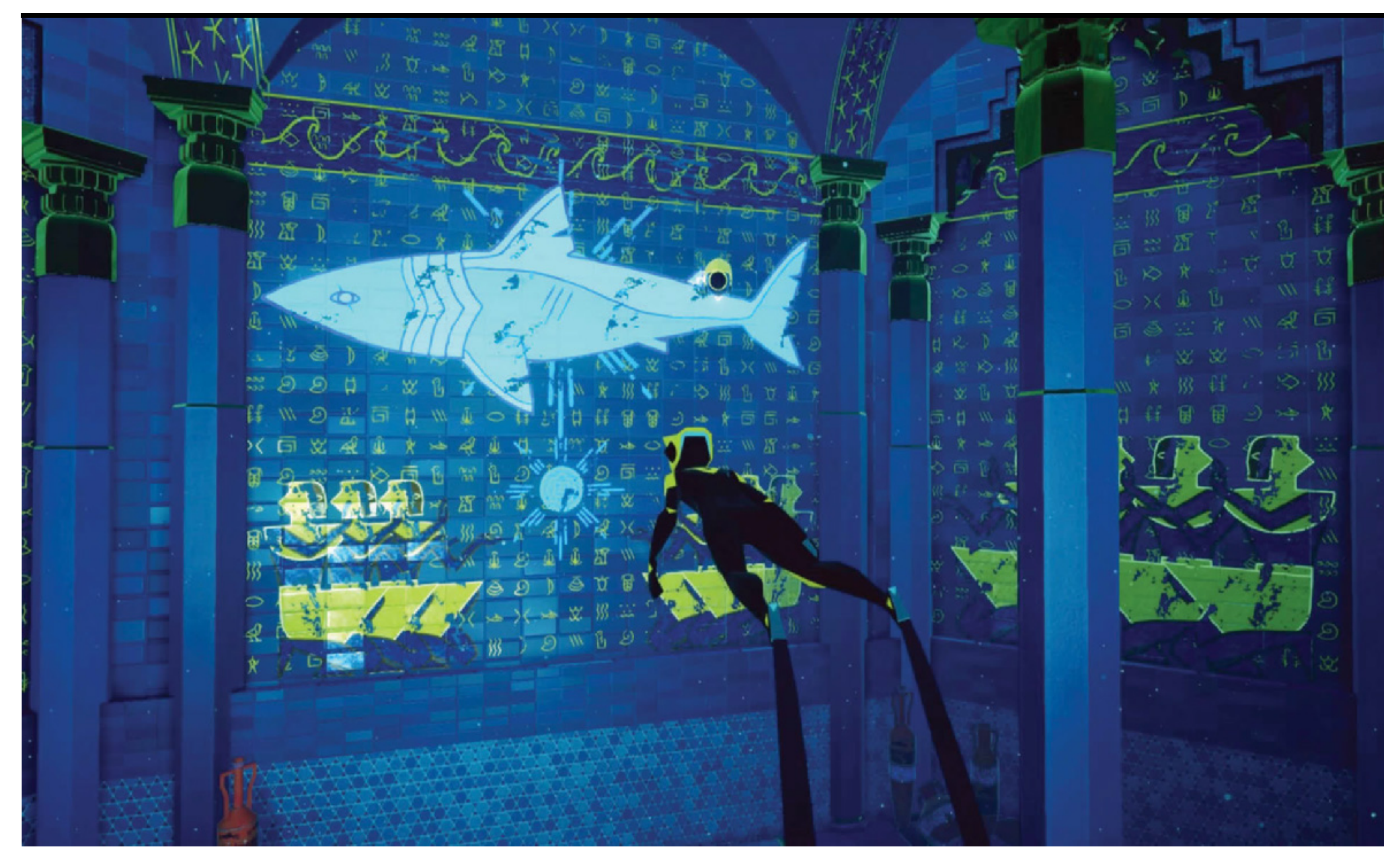


BACK TO THE LAB!





Interface decisions made with VR in mind don't really work in either VR or normal play; reading your emails is a prime example.



Above: Egyptian-like hieroglyphics decorate the walls of ruined temples and structures and provide clues to Abzû's veiled story.

DOWN WHERE IT'S WETTER. BUT BETTER?

Abzû

Plumbing the depths of *Abzû*'s mysterious ocean is, ironically enough, a breath of fresh air. There are no boss fights, no scampering between cover – instead it's just you and the deep blue sea, and the experience is both relaxing and beautiful.

Not that there aren't any stakes in *Abzû* worth fighting for. The game is a story of one being's resistance against a darkness spreading across the ocean. But rather than plunge us into the stress of a battlefield, *Abzû*'s approach is to make its hero more of an unstoppable wave of hope, rather than a one-man army.

The game's hero is presented as something of an enigma, but clues as to his origins are scattered throughout the underwater world. Hieroglyphics that decorate the halls of long-forgotten ruins seem to give us some idea of his race's history, while the few in-engine cutscenes flesh out his character without a word ever being spoken.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: 505 Games
DEVELOPER: Giant Squid Studios
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Perhaps the easiest way to describe him, though, is as a kind of mute Aquaman. Much like DC's hero, he's perfectly at home in the water, never once requiring to return to the surface (though the option is often there should you want to). He also shares Aquaman's kinship with undersea creatures and can swim among sharks and killer whales (and even hitch a ride on them) without fear of attack.

But the game's star attraction isn't its hero, but rather the giant aquarium that is its underwater setting. Its depths are a living ecosystem bustling with life and the intentionally laid back gameplay leaves you free to explore at your leisure. There are even points where you can sit and meditate – which really means that you can leave the hero behind and camera-hop from fish-to-fish to soak up the ambience and take a few photos.

ABZÛ'S STAR ATTRACTION IS ITS VAST UNDERWATER SETTING – THE OCEAN'S DEPTHS A LIVING ECOSYSTEM BUSTLING WITH LIFE

Abzû's art direction is one of minimalist splendour. Though far from photorealistic, every creature, kelp forest and ruined structure looks sumptuous, while the scale of some of the whales – not to mention other more wondrous animals – is truly striking.

Swimming through the water is just as relaxing as impartially observing it, with the fluidity of the hero's movement only adding to the spectacle. The only wrinkle occurs when there's a need to interact with a certain object, or squeeze through a narrow opening. If you don't position the character spot on first time, you'll end up having to re-position both the camera and player character, which does

FAQs

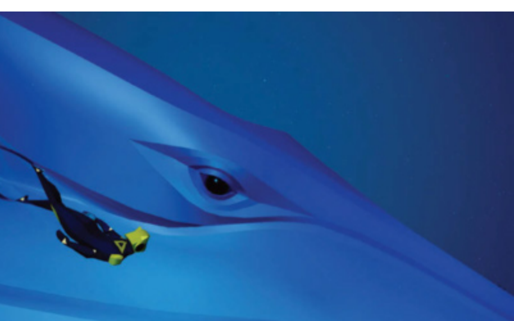
Q. SO, NO COMBAT THEN?
Combat in the sense of guns and violence, no. But expect to employ a little physicality in its latter stages.

Q. WHICH MEANS NO ENEMIES?
There is a malevolent force at play that's corrupting the ocean, and yes, it manifests itself. We're saying no more.

Q. IS IT WORTH REPLAYING?
Absolutely. You're thrown in at the deep end and it's easy to miss hints at the plot the first time through.



Below: I've got my eye on you. Some of the sea life, such as this blue whale, is breathtaking in scale. Giant Squid makes great use of the dramatic effect of such beasts of the deep by using them sparingly.



Below: The interior areas within *Abzû*'s underwater realms are cleverly utilised to break up the game's predominantly blue colour scheme. This ruined temple, for example, is all the more alluring due to its yellow, almost golden, hues.



have the knock-on effect of breaking your captivation in the game.

You might be thinking that *Abzû* is just one big fish bowl with little else to do, but that's not entirely the case. The game is divided into a series of separate areas through which progress can only be made by completing certain tasks. The problem is these can be accomplished disappointingly easily.

An early area, for example, requires that a number of undersea drones (presumably relics of a long-forgotten race) must be found and activated so they can be used to slice through otherwise impassable seaweed – but that's the extent of the 'puzzle'. Later in the game, machines must be put into motion in order to open sealed doors but, again, there's nothing else more tasking than finding the machines and pressing a button on your control pad.

It's obvious that Giant Squid was trying to walk the fine line between making *Abzû*'s objectives as unobtrusive as possible, while at the same time giving players something more to do than simply explore the ocean. Unfortunately, by not fully committing to proper puzzles, the objectives fall flat and become exactly the kind of chore that was presumably trying to be avoided. One look at a new area and you will know exactly what you must do and how to do it, and so begins simply going through the motions.

At least there's a more abstract challenge in piecing together what the hero's mysterious quest actually means. The game's three-hour length makes playing it multiple times an easily accomplished task, but even after the repeated plays the open ending is left to personal interpretation.

With its approach, design and in so many other ways, *Abzû* most closely resembles thatgamecompany's *Journey* and *Flower*. No surprise given that Giant Squid Studio's creative director, Matt Nava, was previously art director at TGS. Intrigueing, minimalist visuals and gaming for the purposes of meditative relaxation form the core of all three of these titles. If anything, *Abzû* feels like a blending of *Journey* and *Flower*. But, though it comes close, it never quite attains the same emotion and drive that made thatgamecompany's titles so compelling.

Where *Abzû* more than matches its spiritual predecessors is with its orchestral score, which brilliantly reflects the mood and immediacy of the gameplay. When you're in an area that can be explored at leisure, you'll be backed by gentle, playful strings. While the odd faster section – such as transitions between areas where slipstreams speed the player along – give the orchestra the opportunity to truly cut loose. The result being breathless, though brief, sequences in which the score's tempo boosts the pace of the action.

If you go into *Abzû* knowing what to expect, you won't be disappointed. Few games have such capacity to draw the player in with beautiful artistic direction and subtle environmental storytelling alone. The addition of puzzles with a bit of meat to them and giving the hero just slightly more growth (see *Journey*'s main character) would have made *Abzû* a classic. Even without these, it remains a mesmerising and memorable experience for anyone who wants to dive in.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

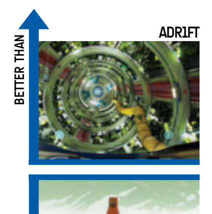
HITCH A RIDE: *Abzû*'s hero can grab on to larger fish and sea-mammals without causing them too much concern. You can even direct them using you control pad to a limited extent.

YOU OWN VIRTUAL AQUARIUM

ONE OF THE stranger aspects of *Abzû*'s gameplay is the way the protagonist can meditate at the many shark-shaped totem poles throughout the environment. Doing so gives no benefit to the character, but allows the player to shift the camera between every fish in the area with a tap of the analogue stick. This shows off the gorgeous effects Giant Squid has layered into the game, from how the light shimmers to the way shoals of fish dart about in perfect sync. Taking the perfect screenshot is almost a metagame in itself and provides one of the biggest reasons yet to make use of the PS4's Share button.

BETTER THAN

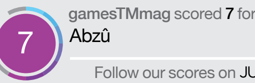
ADRIFT



WORSE THAN

JOURNEY

VERDICT
THE BEAUTIFUL EXPERIENCE JUST FALLS SHORT OF GREATNESS



GAMES™ DOESN'T WANT TO REMEMBER THAT

Batman: The Telltale Series – Ep. 1: Realm Of Shadows

How long can a studio perpetually revel in mediocrity and still succeed in spite of it? In the case of Telltale Games versus the games industry, a decade is apparently the answer. *Batman: The Telltale Series* may only be an episode in, but it has already revealed itself to be a disaster in slow motion; the *same damned problems* between engine, optimisation and pacing revealing themselves once again. *Realm Of Shadows* takes two hours to outline its flaws; we just need ten minutes of your time.

The best Batman stories tend to lean on one integral observation: Bruce Wayne is as important to Gotham City as Batman is. Telltale has clearly taken heed of this, but fails to convey it in any exciting or engaging fashion. Time is split evenly between small talk as stoic rich boy Wayne and statically unsatisfying fistfights as early-days Batman, though Telltale doesn't seem comfortable exploring life either side of the cowl.

Telltale focuses on story first, gameplay second – that's the company's unwritten mantra. Sadly, the writing is particularly bad here, from premise to characterisation, and the delivery of lines is often embarrassingly cheesy. Episode One alone is packed with more laboured exposition than a Zack Snyder DC flick.

There's this awesome moment where you get to plan Batman's assault on a criminal safe house; meticulously deciding which grunts are going to spend the night in A&E and which will spend the week on life support. Then the action begins and it's the same old QTEs: awkwardly staged encounters that fail to capture momentum and require no precision to execute appropriately; movement is as awkward and static as it's ever been.

"<Insert character here> will remember that": a classic line from any Telltale adventure, it adds excitement and uncertainty to the overarching narrative. But what happens when the game fails to remember? Numerous inconsistencies exist, from the Codex failing to properly update after in-game events or character dialogue inaccurately reflecting specific encounters and actions. If the choices you make don't matter in a Telltale game, then nothing matters.

In ten years, the Telltale Tool has been used to create over a hundred episodes of content, but the industry has simply progressed beyond its obvious limitations, making *Batman* look tired and broken. Characters clip in and out of the environment, screen-tear is near constant, dialogue routinely falls out of sync, the framerate slows to a crawl and movement looks stifled and unnatural; it isn't conducive to a fun gaming experience.

For games so wholly focused on delivering key emotional beats and complex narratives, the presentation and optimisation leaves a *lot* to be desired. But then these are the same complaints we've had with Telltale's output since the dawn of the current generation. *Realm Of Shadows*' core systems and mechanics have been built on top of a rickety engine, the issues exacerbated by poor writing and delivery. We aren't hopeful that the next episode will (or even can) address many of these problems.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PS3, Xbox 360, PC, Mac, iOS, Android
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Telltale Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £5.19
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

JURASSIC PARK: THE GAME





WORSE THAN

THE WOLF AMONG US



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TELLTALE TOOL: There's only so many times we can repeat ourselves, but the Telltale Tool is an outdated engine that's actively harming the quality of the studio's output.

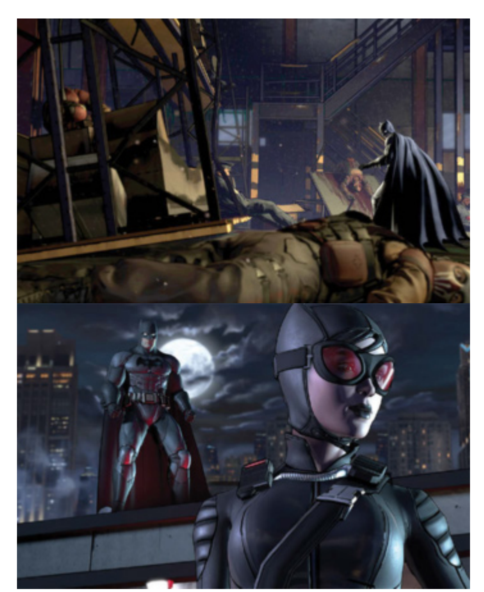
VERDICT

ONE OF TELLTALE'S WEAKEST OPENING CHAPTERS YET



gamesTMmag scored 4 for Batman: The Telltale Series – Realm Of Shadows

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE





Above: Stepping into Kevin Conroy's – the undisputed voice of Batman – shoes was never going to be an easy task for Troy Baker, but he doesn't bring anything particularly special to the role. The voice action is routine, though the script certainly didn't help.

COUCH CO-OP COOKED TO PERFECTION

Overcooked

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, Windows PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Team17
DEVELOPER: Ghost Town Games
PRICE: £12.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: COOKING MAMA 5: BON APPETIT!

WORSE THAN: SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD

Let's get this out of the way right at the start: *Overcooked* is one of the best couch co-op games ever made. You'll laugh, scream and have one of the best nights it's possible to have with a group of friends.

Taking place in the delightful Onion Kingdom, *Overcooked* has a visual design strongly influenced by Jim Henson – with a hint of Nintendo at its best. You and up to three friends are tasked with taking orders and preparing food for the waiting public. Easy? Of course not.

Overcooked presents you with an order, the ingredients you need, a chopping board, oven and plates. Simple, right? You've made food before; the lot of you can just get to work. Of course, that's when things begin to break down and you realise there needs to be a plan. One person should be on chopping, one washing up, one on ingredient collection and one on cooking and sending the food out. Bravo, you passed! But wait, you only got one star out of a possible three? You need these stars to progress to the next level, so it's back to the drawing (and chopping) board.

Just when you think you have the perfect strategy *Overcooked* changes the rules: sections of the kitchen will move at random, trapping certain people in different areas meaning they can't do their assigned job any more. The conveyor belts made to transport things to your friends on the other side of the room now throw your food in to a bin if you don't coordinate. You will genuinely shout things like "Onions! Onions! Onions!" at your friends. You will absolutely need to be vocal if you want to succeed in the kitchen.

To get the full three stars on every level you're going to need to get serious, though. This sort of hunt for perfection brings with it a beautiful madness. We actually drew diagrams of the perfect movement patterns for some of the toughest levels.

Overcooked isn't without its flaws: playing alone sees you controlling two characters at the same time, leaving one to chop ingredients while you swap to another to cook. Versus mode can be fun with four players but if there are three of you it simply won't let you play and two makes you control extra characters in the same manner as single-player. This in turn makes you notice the lack of online play even more. However, when a game is as balanced and perfect in co-op mode as this it's hard to worry about these things too much

Overcooked will enter your regular game night rotation for years to come – it's up there with the likes of *Rayman Legends* and *Super Mario 3D World*. If you need a new game to play with three friends, this is the one.

Above: It's time to change your strategy because now you're making food on an ice platform which you can fall off due to how tough it is to move around on. This game will never let you get comfortable.



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

ONLINE MULTIPLAYER: We would love to see online play brought in to this game, something we think would make up for the few negatives *Overcooked* has in its single-player experience.

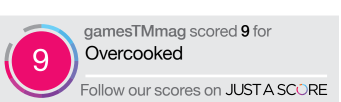


Above: The character designs are wonderful with more being unlocked as you progress. See that rat there? He will steal your ingredients if you leave them laying around unattended for a moment in certain levels.



VERDICT

AN INSTANT CLASSIC AND CLOSE TO PERFECTION





Headlander gets incredibly chaotic. Sometimes it can even be difficult to follow your head on the screen through all of the explosions. It's worth it though, as encounters usually force a smile.

DON'T LOSE YOUR HEAD

Headlander

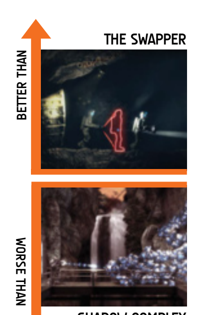
A Headlander reviews word-cloud would be pure filth. There's no real way to write about this game without talking about giving robots head – your head, to be precise – or mentioning shag-pile carpets. You see, the game's core concept is that you are a head. The last human alive, you have no body, lungs, or any of that good stuff; you're just a voiceless, rocket-propelled head stuck in a retro-futurist dystopia full of fashion conscious robots who love plush carpets.

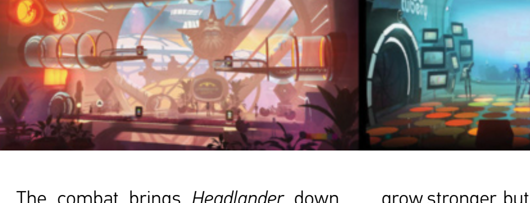
We've mugged civilians for their wheels in countless games, but this 2D metroidvania has you steal their bodies instead: robodogs, interactive maps, civilians, security and even cleaning droids can be commandeered by your floating bonce. Each has a purpose, whether it be downloading layouts, getting through security or slipping through a vent.

Rocketing around these Seventies sci-fi kitsch environments feels great, as does hovering near whatever you're trying to take over and removing their dome – there's just enough resistance for it to feel satisfyingly tactile. And when you have a body, moving about just feels right, even without a jump button. Who needs to jump when you can just launch your head across gaps anyway?

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Adult Swim Games
DEVELOPER: Double Fine Productions
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7 (64-bit), Dual-core 2 GHz, 4 GB RAM, GeForce GTX 550 Ti, AMD Radeon HD 7750, 4 GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A





The combat brings *Headlander* down, though. You bodysnatch colour-coded security bots to pass appropriately-coloured doors, either by sucking off their noggin or shooting it off. You want to avoid damaging the body too much, as that's yours when you're anchored in. Basically, combat requires precision, but it's chaotic. When there are multiple enemies, the screen cracks with multi-coloured laser fire, ricocheting from walls, crunching into metal bodies and crumbling scenery. It's tough to keep track of your shots and sometimes you'll even shoot yourself and have to find a new host. It's messy and it lacks nuance. You can take cover, but often it's better to just spray until your health dwindles, rocket off, steal a body and do it all again.

Combat intensity goes up in tandem with the complexity of *Headlander*'s backtrack-heavy maps, but it never progresses beyond throwing more stuff at you. You grow stronger, but the growing odds negate that strength. And anyway, you respawn almost immediately back at the start of the room in which you die, so there's no peril either. Combat is kind of just there, and it gets in the way of the great comedy, lovely environments and compulsive exploration.

MISSING LINK

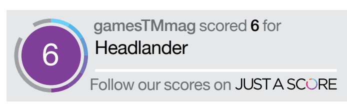
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MORE SECRET SECRETS: Just moving around *Headlander*'s gorgeous world feels great, but the map tells you exactly where to go for each secret, upgrade or side quest. Strip this out and it changes backtracking busywork into exploration.

There are attempts at switching up the formula, but these are brief departures. Like the combat, it feels like the game's story, outside of gags, also has nothing to say. *Headlander* filters transhumanism through a comedy lens, but it never provokes thought. Considering you're all head, you'd think there would be more brains.

VERDICT

A GREAT CONCEPT THAT DOESN'T REALISE ITS POTENTIAL







Above: Blendo Games takes something as mundane as inputting lines of code and delivers a stunning heist game in *Quadrilateral Cowboy*. Once you learn the basics, it opens up in ways you couldn't possibly imagine.

GO AHEAD AND CALL US MR. ROBOT

Quadrilateral Cowboy

'Camera4.off(3).' You'll transfer that command sheepishly from conscious thought to keyboard, wondering what in the hell you've gotten yourself into with *Quadrilateral Cowboy*. *"Oh, here we go,"* you'll think, rolling your eyes.

Because there you are staring at a blank, black screen - the likes of which you haven't seen since the days of MS-DOS - wondering whether a hacking game that actively requires you to be au fait with coding is a step too far. But then the light on the security camera blocking your path dims - giving you just three seconds to cross a space before it reactivates and alerts security to your presence - and you'll feel your heart rate spike as you dash for safety.

An hour later, and you're on a roll. 'Camera4.off(3); wait(10); Camera4.off(3),' you'll touch-type without question; cameras go off, you run and grab a precious item and then 10 seconds later the camera is back off for you to make an escape. *Quadrilateral Cowboy* is exhilarating in a way rarely felt in gaming. It takes something quite mundane (coding) and makes it the difference between life and a restart screen.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Blendo Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7/8.1/10, 2.0 GHz CPU, 3GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce 9800 GT or ATI Radeon HD 5750, 1 GB video RAM, 1200 MB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: VOLUME



WORSE THAN: KEEP TALKING AND NOBODY EXPLODES

We talk about immersion too much, but few achieve it as perfectly as Blendo Games' latest.

It isn't long before you are inputting long lines of code to your deployable PC without fear of putting a character out of place; executing a string of code that lets you manoeuvre between a series of doors, trip wires, cameras and other agents of death to pull off the perfect heist without detection. This is *Quadrilateral Cowboy*, the game that finds a perfect symmetry between keystrokes, success and a joy rarely found in videogames.

What's perhaps most impressive about *Quadrilateral Cowboy* is how quickly it teaches you without saying a word. It's literally a game where you find yourself typing in ever more complex lines of code to execute a successful heist, but - after an initial few minutes of confusion - you never feel lost within it. You feel truly empowered. You'll begin making your code more complex than you thought you were capable of. You'll transform from apprentice to master and feel better because of it; perplexed that you are even able to do the action and, ultimately, satisfied by the reaction.

If any complaint can be levied at *Quadrilateral Cowboy* it's that there isn't more of it. The game doesn't give you the opportunity to truly let loose with the tools you've learned and acquired within it. It's without question Blendo Games' most fully formed videogame, but it stumbles by not providing you with a final act of situations to fully express your creativity. *Quadrilateral Cowboy* is a puzzle game unlike any other, but it's not quite substantial enough to establish itself as a bonafide classic.

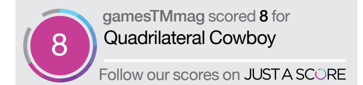
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

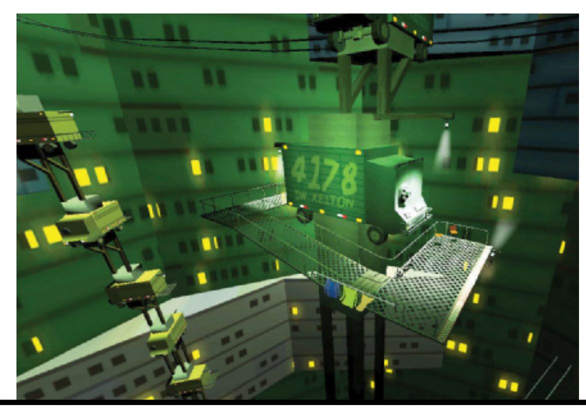
CODING KNOWLEDGE: By making you learn actual lines of code and by giving you the tools to execute them, *Quadrilateral Cowboy* becomes unmistakably immersive.



A PERFECT STORM OF IDEAS



Below: *Quadrilateral Cowboy* is an empowering game. It's designed in such a way that it constantly wills you to challenge its systems and when you succeed, it imbues you with a real sense of accomplishment.







"Every single thing that they do was so well done"
BEN HAUMILLER, PRODUCER, EA SPORTS

WHY I ❤...

UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END

BEN HAUMILLER
PRODUCER, EA SPORTS

"I just finished playing Uncharted 4 *at home, and that's one of those games that's just jaw dropping. It's just so much fun. Every single thing that they do was so well done. I know that's not an EA game, but we're not here just to talk about EA. We play everything. That's the beauty of being a game developer is that you have to play everything. You have to understand what's going on in the industry."*



RETRO

NO.178

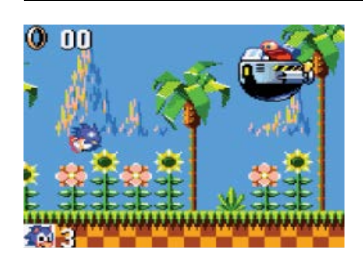
DISCUSS | Have your say on all things retro on our dedicated forum **www.gamestm.co.uk/forum**

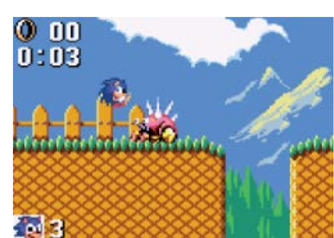
THE RETRO GUIDE TO... SEGA GAME GEAR



As Sega's handheld celebrates its 25th anniversary in the UK we examine its best games. How many did you play?

SEGA'S GAME GEAR was created with one purpose – to go head-to-head with Nintendo's phenomenally successful Game Boy. On paper, the Game Gear appeared to have everything it needed to be a success of its own. It had a large colour screen like its closest rival, the Atari Lynx, but unlike Atari's console had far better third-party support. US Gold, Probe Software, Taito, Codemasters and Acclaim were just a few of the many developers and publishers that supported the system, and it played host to a large number of games. It must be said though that the Game Gear didn't have a huge number of exclusives, relying instead on Master System and cut-down Mega Drive ports. It was still worth owning however, with the following games still holding up incredibly well today. Pick one up yourself and discover what Sega's console still has to offer.





SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 1991

ANCIENT

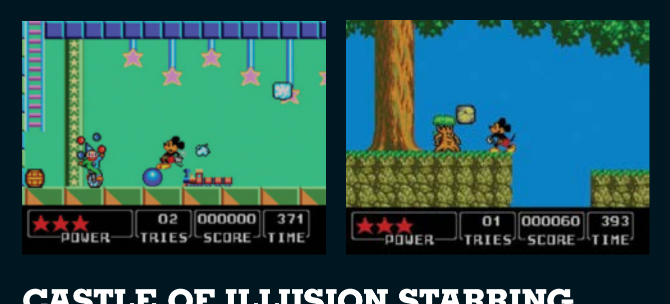
It's easy to dismiss Game Gear *Sonic* as an inferior version of the Mega Drive game, but that's a wrong assumption to make. It's actually a port of the Master System game, meaning it's an excellent little platformer that is structurally completely different to its bigger 16-bit brother. Like the Master System game it features two brand-new zones, both of which introduce fun, new gameplay mechanics that freshen up the game considerably. The final zone has also been redesigned over the Mega Drive game, too, and the whole thing works surprisingly well on the Game Gear's tiny screen. An excellent effort that we prefer over *Sonic 2*.



THE G.G. SHINOBI 1991

SEGA

Sadly, the Game Gear didn't get too many must-have exclusives. Still, both *The G.G. Shinobi* and its sequel eased the pain somewhat being excellent action titles that really played to the strengths of Sega's handheld. The graphics throughout *Shinobi* are excellent, with beautifully detailed backdrops and slick animation. It's the gameplay that makes the game so special though. The first four stages can be tackled in any order and feature a ninja buddy to rescue at the level's end. Save them and their powers can be used *Mega Man*-style to hopefully gain a bonus on the next level. The final stage is the best, though, requiring clever use of all five ninjas in order to succeed. The only thing that lets it down is its high difficulty level.



CASTLE OF ILLUSION STARRING MICKEY MOUSE 1991

SEGA

There are many that prefer Mickey's 8-bit outing to his Mega Drive one and it's hard to disagree with them. It features completely different gameplay mechanics, vastly different level design and a far more challenging difficulty level. It obviously doesn't look as nice as the Mega Drive offering, but it's still a lovely-looking Game Gear title.



POPILS 1991

TENGEN

This excellent puzzle game has you trying to reach your girlfriend in as few steps as possible. Gameplay consists of you punching blocks and avoiding hazards to reach her or creating a path for the princess to reach you. When you're done with the 100 levels there's a brilliant edit mode to tackle that can save up to 30 of your own creations.





AX BATTLER: A LEGEND OF GOLDEN AXE 1991

ASPECT

This interesting attempt to diversify Sega's popular scrolling fighter saw it straying into *Zelda II* territory. Gameplay in *Ax Battler* is divided between three distinct sections: Map sections used to traverse the landscape, Town areas for buying items and interacting with NPCs and Action sections where combat takes place. It's a little easy, but certainly worth persevering with.

DEFENDERS OF OASIS 1992

SEGA

Many of the Game Gear's RPGs remained confined to Japan, but this is one of the best to reach the west. It shares many similarities with *Phantasy Star* in terms of its actual structure, but its design and influence is more in common with Arabian mythology, making it feel very distinct – even today. Combat is relatively straightforward and the characterisation is a little twee, but *Defenders of Oasis* remains an engaging adventure with plenty to do.



"THE CHARACTERISATION IS A LITTLE TWEE, BUT DEFENDERS OF OASIS REMAINS AN ENGAGING ADVENTURE"

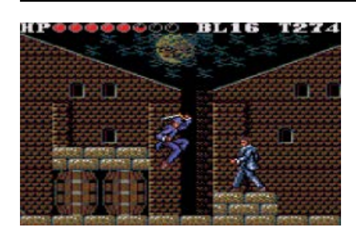


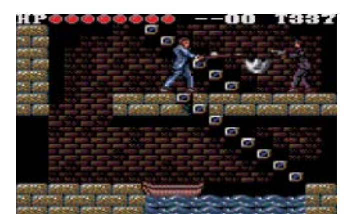


AYRTON SENNA'S SUPER MONACO GP II 1992

SEGA

This is a huge improvement on the original launch game and it was overseen by the late Ayrton Senna, too. The sound is still pretty grating, but this is a huge improvement graphically over its predecessor with a good sensation of speed and smooth scrolling. There's a variety of gameplay modes, the ability to customise your vehicle and a fun two-player mode. There aren't too many racing games on Sega's handheld, so this is the one to go for.





MASTER OF DARKNESS 1992

SIMS

Sega owners never got to experience *Castlevania* on 8-bit consoles and handhelds, so this fun effort from SIMS was a welcome alternative. Like the popular Konami games, *Master Of Darkness* featured a great gothic theme, plenty of horrific-looking enemies to destroy and some very challenging bosses. We'd argue that *Master Of Darkness* looks far better than the first two *Castlevanias* however, while the controls are extremely tight and intuitive and there are better weapons, including a gun and boomerang.

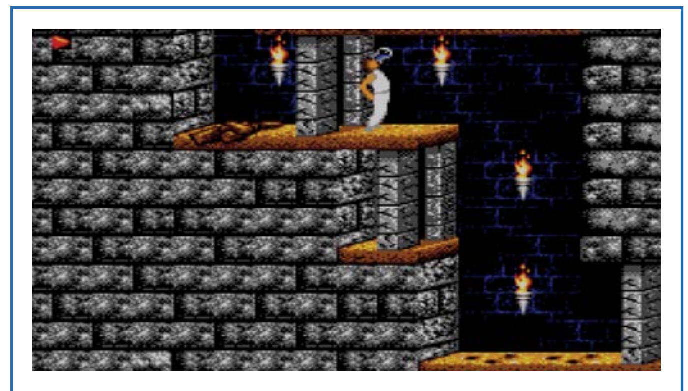




WONDER BOY III: THE DRAGON'S TRAP 1992

WEST ONE

There's a reason why two different developers are paying tribute to *Wonder Boy III* – it's quite simply the greatest adventure game to ever appear on the Master System, and subsequently, the Game Gear. Unlike many other Master System ports, the Game Gear version received a few subtle tweaks to make it look better on the portable console, with Sega redesigning or simply removing certain rooms. Charm stones were far more important than in the Master System game and could be used to return to the main hub at any time, which made it slightly easier. It's still a brilliant game though thanks to the ability to switch between *Wonder Boy*'s vastly different forms, and the clever and inventive level design.



PRINCE OF PERSIA 1992

TENGEN

With an hour of real time to rescue your princess, *Prince Of Persia* is perfect for portable play. Like the excellent Master System conversion, Game Gear's *Prince Of Persia* features stunning animation, meticulous level design and incredibly tight controls. Your quest is fraught with danger, with the prince having to leap over dangerous pits, avoid deadly spikes and fight his way past an army of guards. While the gorgeous animation looks as good today as it did in 1992, it's the excellent controls that really impress.

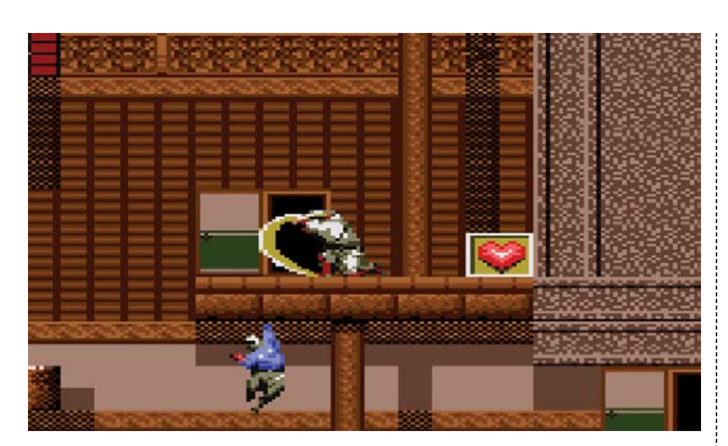




LEMMINGS 1992

PROBE ENTERTAINMENT

Lemmings was ported to seemingly hundreds of systems on its release and the Game Gear was no exception. While it obviously suffers in the control department (the Amiga original used a mouse) there's very little to complain about otherwise. The levels translate across to the tiny screen very nicely, while the cute little Lemmings are extremely well animated and full of character. It can be awkward selecting different Lemmings at first, but you soon get the hang of it.



SHINOBI II: THE SILENT FURY 1992

SEGA

Everything about *The Silent Fury* is a huge improvement over the original. Enemies are nice, varied and exceedingly well animated, while the bosses are also of a very high standard, matching the brilliantly detailed levels. Mechanically, it's very similar to the first game, so Joe's ninja buddies have once again managed to have been captured, meaning Joe has to rescue them. Some of the ninjas now have new abilities that keep the gameplay fresh, while there are now crystals to collect before you can unlock the final level and take on its challenging boss. An excellent sequel with a better refined difficulty level, too.

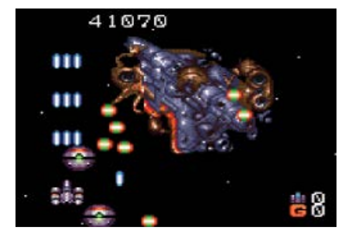




POWER STRIKE 2 1993

COMPILE

Although this excellent exclusive shares its name with a Master System title, they're actually completely different games. Compile's game is known as *GG Aleste II: Lance Bird* in Japan and pushes the system to its absolute limits. Yes there is flicker and a fair amount of slowdown, but they rarely affect the gameplay, which is simply outstanding. Enemy waves are well designed and constantly keep you guessing; the bosses are not only huge, but also inventive and take an age to take down. The soundtrack meanwhile is superb, effortlessly matching the chaotic on-screen carnage. The power-ups are excellent, too, allowing you to change your fighting style to best deal with the enemy hordes. An outstanding blaster.



GAME GEAR COLLECTING 101

James Bull shares his extensive knowledge

Why do you collect Game Gear games?

The main reason I collect is I could never afford the console or the games when I was younger. At nearly £300 when new, 50p a week pocket money wouldn't reach – and there were sweets, so many sweets to buy! Like all collecting you start with the games you wish you had from the childhood and then expand until it's an obsession – do I really need to eat this week? That game will be mine!

How does it compare to the other handhelds of the time?

Personally, it's the best. Colour screen in 1990! Easy to play, superb games and battery life? That's why they invented the portable battery pack. It had massive competition with the Game Boy, but for me with its bright variable colour LCD – it just wins for me. Great sound. SEGA!

How do you feel about the library of exclusives on the system?

Sonic is an icon, there is no doubt. And the games transferred to the console from the Master System are a wonder to behold. We are talking just a few megabytes of information on a chip, but these games are a legend in gaming. They appeal to every age group, they capture every bit of excitement as you progress through the game and 25 years later they are still exciting children today.

Do you collect cart or box only?

For the main PAL set it has to be box only, complete and as near as possible to mint as you can get – sealed if possible. Some games never had a box when produced like the test carts, so they will always be loose. But for the completion of the production run they need to be boxed and placed in alphabetical order: in cases, without sunlight. This collecting is a serious business.



What's the most expensive game in your system?

It would have to be *Power Drive*. Very common on the Mega Drive, it was released so late in 1996 it never made it on the Master System. Only ten complete boxed PAL versions are known to exist in the entire world, to date.

It took me five years to find this game in the condition I wanted. Not the best game in the collection, but collecting a full set is not always about playability. It's about completion.

What advice would you give to other collectors?

If you are starting out decide if you want to collect loose cart or boxed first. Collecting loose games is easy, then down the line you think 'maybe I should go for boxed', and then you have to start again! Room is always a deciding factor for a full boxed set; you are going to need quite a bit of space.

If you see a boxed mint game that's quite expensive, buy it! Never wait, because I passed up a boxed rare game I didn't see it again until three years later and it cost more. The thrill of the hunt can be very rewarding, finding a game cheap.

I found the Game Gear to be one of the hardest collections to complete, but it is the most satisfying when complete. I have made friends from all over the world, collecting truly covers all religions and boundries.

LAND OF ILLUSION STARRING MICKEY MOUSE 1993

SEGA



This is a great follow-up to *Castle Of Illusion* and is yet another Master System port. The graphic engine of the original has been slightly improved, but mechanically it's very similar to its predecessor. It earns additional bonus points however due to the many classic Disney characters it features, including Goofy, Donald, Minnie and Daisy. Interestingly, the main villain is the same one that appears in *The Black Cauldron*.



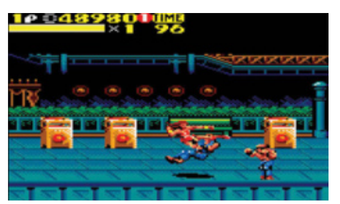
FANTASTIC DIZZY 1993

CODEMASTERS

Dizzy had great success on the various 8-bit home computers, so his leap to consoles wasn't all that surprising. What was surprising though was the complete lack of a password or save system, which seems a bizarre omission on a portable console. Get past this however and you'll discover a lot to enjoy. The puzzles are varied and not too tough, there's a selection of fun minigames to tackle, while the Game Gear's colourful palette is great at capturing Dizzy's colourful world. Unlike earlier Dizzy games it's quite fast paced, too, making it a cinch to navigate the sprawling play area.

"THERE'S A SELECTION OF FUN MINIGAMES TO TACKLE, WHILE THE GAME GEAR'S COLOURFUL PALETTE IS GREAT AT CAPTURING DIZZY'S COLOURFUL WORLD"





STREETS OF RAGE 2 1993

BIOX

You'd expect a handheld port of one of the Mega Drive's most critically acclaimed games to be rather rubbish on the Game Gear. You'd be dead wrong. While there are obviously compromises in squeezing the epic game onto the handheld, this is still impressive stuff. Sprites are small, but perfectly formed and well animated, while the Game Gear's chip makes a good attempt to copy Yuzo Koshiro's excellent dance-fuelled soundtrack. The moves suffer a little due to the lack of three buttons, but the action remains fun and frantic. Interestingly, it features different levels and colour schemes to the Master System version and even manages two-player support, too.

SONIC CHAOS 1993

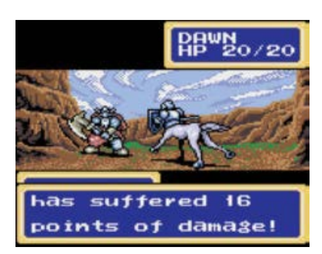
ASPECT

Sega released a large number of exclusive *Sonic* games for the Game Gear, ranging from kart racers like *Sonic Drift* to a stand-alone adventure for Sonic's best friend, Tails. Sadly, their quality was quite questionable, so we're going to focus on one of its best Master System ports instead – *Sonic Chaos*.

The biggest change to earlier Game Gear *Sonics* is that it's now possible to play as either Sonic or Tails, otherwise it is business as usual, with Sonic racing through colourful-looking stages, collecting rings, avoiding enemies and trying to reach the exit as quickly as possible. The stage design isn't quite as slick as the earlier 8-bit *Sonic* games, but they play a lot faster and the graphics have been greatly enhanced. A sequel, *Sonic Triple Trouble*, arrived a year later exclusive for the Game Gear but was nowhere near as good.







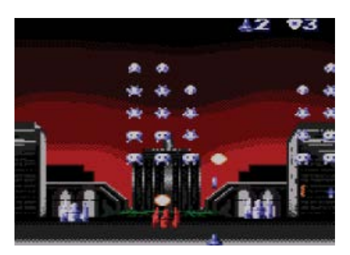


SHINING FORCE: THE SWORD OF HAJYA 1993

CAMELOT

Although the Game Gear was home to a fair few RPGs, many of them were frustratingly confined to the east. Initially Camelot's game feels a bit confusing as it directly follows on from its predecessor, you know, the one that only appeared in Japan. It soon settles down however and you can enjoy a surprisingly solid story with a surprising amount of decent characterisation and robust combat. It was later rereleased with its predecessor as *Shining Force CD*.





SUPER SPACE INVADERS 1992

TIERTEX DESIGN STUDIOS

If the original *Space Invaders* was able to inject itself with steroids, this is what it would have transformed into. *Super Space Invaders* is a fantastic fast-paced shooter that takes the core *Space Invaders* formula but adds zany power-ups, challenging attack waves and multiple routes through the game. Oh and it's got a gloriously silly bonus wave where you must shoot UFOs before they can carry off grazing cows.



BUBBLE BOBBLE 1994

OPEN CORP

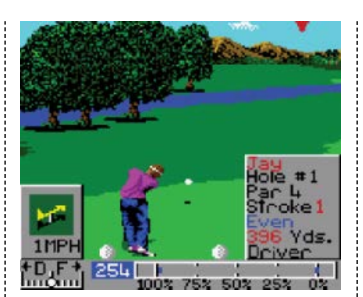
The playing area is a little cramped due to the Gear's tiny screen, but this remains an excellent port of the hit arcade game and has you playing a cute dinosaur that must trap enemies by blowing bubbles at them. Like the Master System it suffers from a little flicker, but it features all the same levels and retains the excellent two-player mode. Unfortunately, it only appeared in the US, meaning complete copies of the game are slowly rising in price.

ROAD RASH 1993

PROBE ENTERTAINMENT

This is another highly impressive port by Probe. It's obviously graphically cut down compared to the Mega Drive original, but all the thrills and spills have been successfully ported across. It's comparable to the Master System version and contains the same five levels and bike customisation options, as well as some very decent scrolling and undulating tracks. In fact the only thing it's really missing is the enjoyable two-player mode. It's a small price to pay for one of the system's best racers, though.





PGA TOUR GOLF II 1995

POLYGON GAMES

It can be prone to some annoying pauses at times, but this remains the best golf game you can play on the Game Gear. It doubles the two-megabyte cartridge of the original game to deliver six courses, a slew of options, greatly improved visuals and the ability to play against three professional golfers. Gameplay is tight and responsive, and it's possible to play with up to three friends. A great adaptation of the Mega Drive original.

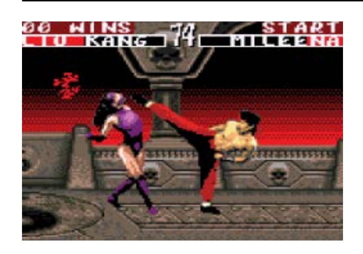


GUNSTAR HEROES 1995

M2

Astonishing is the best way to sum up M2's port. Yes it's received a massive visual downgrade and the infamous board game stage is absent, but this is still an incredible effort that retains all the brilliance of Treasure's Mega Drive debut. The outstanding boss Seven Force has been changed quite substantially and there isn't a two-player mode, but this remains an essential run-and-gun for the Game Gear and an exceptional showcase for the system.







MORTAL KOMBAT II 1994

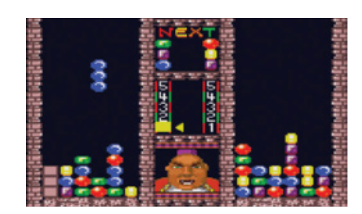
PROBE ENTERTAINMENT

The Game Gear is starved of decent one-on-one fighters, so even a cut-down version of *Mortal Kombat II* is certainly worth investigating. Probe Entertainment handled the port and it's very impressive considering the technical limitations of the screen. Eight characters are included, although the likes of Raiden, Jonny Cage and Kung Lao are notable in their absence. Several stages are omitted, too, but it doesn't affect gameplay, which is tight and responsive. Fatalities made the cut and the five-button system of the arcade is compromised (Start is used for blocking) but this remains an enjoyable (if rather barebones) fighter.

SUPER COLUMNS 1995

SEGA

Sega's Game Gear exclusive makes the first game look positively anaemic. There are three different gameplay modes: Endless, Story and Flash and each one offer plenty to sink your teeth into. While the gameplay still has you matching three titles of the same colour, there are a number of useful power-ups that greatly enhance the gameplay. It's a lot quicker than the plodding original too.









BAKU BAKU 1996

MINATO GIKEN

Although it started off life in the arcades this smart puzzler is better suited to Sega's handheld. Animal and food blocks fall down from the sky and you arrange tiles to put the critters next to their favourite foodstuffs. Once matched, they munch away at every tile, sending it to your opponent's part of the screen. Fast, fun and relentless.

MORE GAME GEAR GAMES

- PENGO (1990) SEGA
- DRAGON CRYSTAL (1990) SEGA
- FACTORY PANIC (1991) SEGA
- FANTASY ZONE (1991) SEGA
- MARBLE MADNESS (1992) ATARI GAMES
- SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2 (1992) ASPECT
- BATTLETOADS (1993) RARE
- COOL SPOT (1993) VIRGIN INTERACTIVE
- MICRO MACHINES (1993) CODEMASTERS
- NBA JAM (1993) MIDWAY GAMES
- COCA-COLA KID (1994) ASPECT
- ECCO THE DOLPHIN (1994) SEGA
- MS. PAC-MAN (1995) NAMCO
- RISTAR (1995) SEGA



DIABLO

BEHIND THE SCENES

Having championed a whole new way to play RPGs and spawning the term "Diablo-clone" that is still used to classify an entire sub-genre to this day, we look at the origins of what would become one of Blizzard's staple franchises



Released: 1996
Format: PC, Mac, PlayStation
Publisher: Blizzard Entertainment
Key Staff: David Brevik (senior designer/programmer), Bill Roper (producer/writer), Erich Schaefer (senior designer), Matt Uelmen (composer)

ONCE IN A WHILE THE GAMES INDUSTRY GIVES BIRTH TO SUCH A NEW, INNOVATIVE GAME THAT IT TRANSCENDS THE VERY GENRE IT CLAIMS TO HAVE BEEN A PART OF. There's a common pattern among such originality, too: said game goes on to become a storming success, the developer produces an even better sequel while competitors scramble to mimic, imitate or downright copy the elements that made this new idea so compelling. One such title is the original *Diablo*, which might not be quite the stellar example that its sequel was but was still responsible for first introducing a variety of fresh ideas to the RPG genre. There's no blunting the significance of Blizzard's action RPG: it changed everything.



There's little to no fanfare as you're dropped unceremoniously into the world, but it's pick up and play gameplay required no introduction.

"I had really thought of the idea when I was in high school," key designer, programmer and one of the founders of *Diablo* development studio Condor David Brevik tells us as he discusses the game's origins. "I lived here in San Francisco Bay area and just in the east part of the area is where I was living at the time. I was living at the base of Mount Diablo and that's exactly where the name comes from. I moved out here in high school and into California from Georgia. I didn't speak any Spanish when we moved out here, and when I found out what that name meant I was like 'Oh, that's a great name for a game someday'." It hadn't just been the name that stuck with him, either. Brevik's childhood and college life spent playing videogames had obviously had an impact and he knew that this was going to be his career. He majored in computer science, would go on to found his own development studio and maintained a passionate dream for creating fantastic PC games as the new team sought contract work making cartridge games. "And so I designed this RPG in high school that was going to be called Diablo," he continued. "The design morphed over the years and really was heavily influenced by a bunch of UNIX games that I was playing in college, roguelike games: like *Rogue*, *Angband*, *Moria*, *Nethack* and there were a few others that I was playing at the time that had a great influence on the design I wanted to make."

I LIVED IN SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA AT THE BASE OF MOUNT DIABLO AND THAT'S EXACTLY WHERE THE NAME COMES FROM



David Brevik is now making indie titles as Graybeard Games.

This idea wouldn't come to fruition for many years after. Having formed Condor and getting to work on producing games for contracts, Brevik and the team would have a chance meeting with a company that had then been known as Silicon & Synapse. This, it would turn out, would become the birth of *Diablo* as we know it. "Condor and Silicon & Synapse were both working on doing contract work for making cartridge games on SNES and Sega Genesis," explained Brevik. "We had a contract to do a game on the Genesis called *Justice League Task Force*, which was a fighting game kind of like *Street Fighter* but with the Justice League, all the DC superheroes. So we show up at CES in Vegas, and this was before E3 existed. Videogames had a small section there and we showed up and we were showing off our games to retailers who would hopefully want to stock their shelves with the product come Christmas time." As it happened, however, Brevik and team discovered that they weren't the only developer working on a *Justice League Task Force* fighting game, so, too, was Silicon & Synapse. "We never knew that there was another version of this game being made," laughed Brevik, who explained that the two only really noticed each other because of this unusual circumstance. "What was even weirder was that the games were strangely similar. They were very, very close in look and everything. You could tell right away that the companies thought very, very similarly."



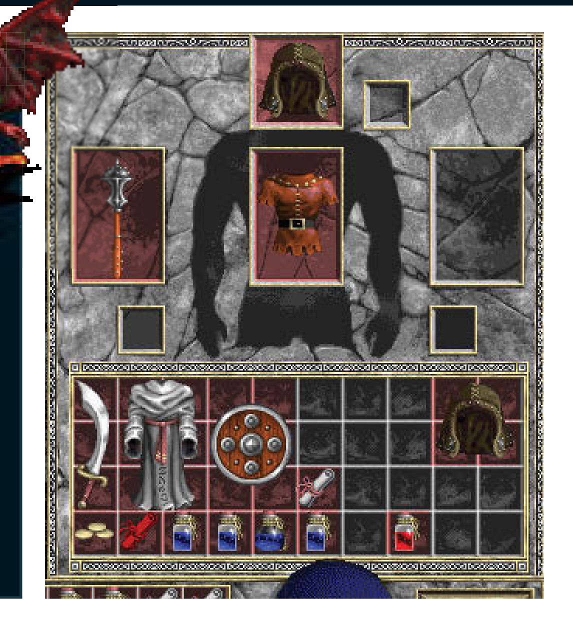
Unlike following *Diablo* games - where your class really specified how you levelled up – they originally allowed you to adapt as you played.

Inevitably the two companies got talking at CES, with the developers at Silicon & Synapse explaining that it was due to sell its cartridge-making contract-working company, start a new company and begin making PC

THE DEVIL YOU KNOW

Brevik on how Diablo's multiplayer came to be

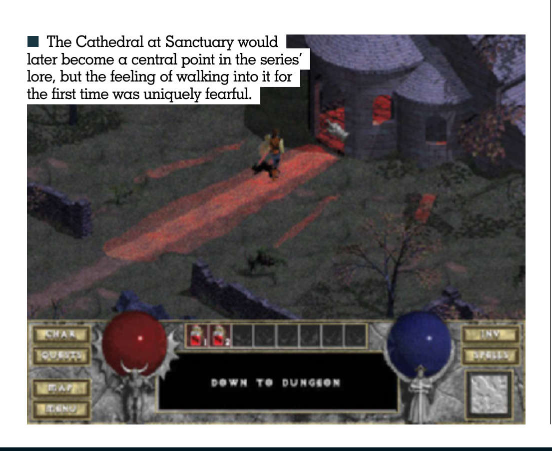
IN THEORY, THE very first pitch was single-player, we wanted to do multiplayer but we had no networking experience. And so [Blizzard] said "We're going to make it multiplayer" and then we said, "Yeah, sure, multiplayer… okay…" and so we went along for about a year and they asked "So how is that multiplayer coming along?" And we said it was coming along well but meanwhile it wasn't multiplayer at all. Then they came around and asked to take a look at it. It wasn't running at all, and they said "Oh my god, this isn't ready for multiplayer at all." A couple of the guys from Blizzard had done a bunch of LAN multiplayer things with the *WarCraft* game so they moved up to the Bay Area for a couple of months and helped us convert the game – and wrote the code – to make the game into multiplayer. It educated us on how it worked and things like that, it was a superb experience.



games instead. "We at Condor were like 'Oh, we've been pitching this PC game idea for a while now, and nobody wants to make this game. It's an RPG, everyone says that RPGs are dead but PC games are what we want to do'. We wanted to make PC stuff, that's what we were passionate about. We wanted to make PC stuff, and not just contract work for cartridges." And so Condor was offered an opportunity to pitch to the company that would go on to become Blizzard. Silicon & Synapse finished its game – a little known title called *WarCraft: Orcs & Humans* – would officially form Blizzard that same year and, as promised, go to meet Condor to see its pitch. "They came out to hear our pitch right after Christmas in early January," said Brevik. "We pitched them *Diablo*, and they fell in love with it instantly and they signed us to develop the game."

Brevik had already pitched his idea before, so going through the motions once more wasn't so complicated: "When we were pitching it, the idea was that we're just going to take those old roguelike games where you are the @ symbol attacking the letter K and put graphics on top of it, so making it an updated, modern version of that." A simple enough concept, sure, but it was pitched as a fairly different game to the innovative *Diablo* we now know. "It was turn-based, it was single-player and at the time Windows didn't exist when we were pitching – or at least it was Windows 3.1 so it was really bad and nobody made games for it – so it was DOS based. And strangely one of the things we had thought about doing was based on an arcade machine called *Primal Rage*, which was done with a claymation video to animate the characters and we thought about doing the same thing for our Diablo game. It would give us a very unique look among other games," explained Brevik, before adding that, "in actuality, once we actually signed the contract it was a couple of weeks and we realised that was a really bad idea." In addition to this, Brevik told us that the pitch was to include the concept of DLC before

BLIZZARD SUGGESTED WE TURN IT INTO REAL-TIME AND I WAS REALLY OPPOSED TO IT, ACTUALLY

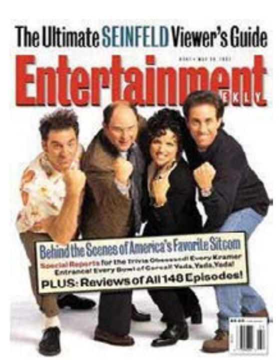


The Cathedral at Sanctuary would later become a central point in the series' lore, but the feeling of walking into it for the first time was uniquely fearful.



Considering just how dark the game was, there was a great use of visual elements to make each floor feel exciting and new during exploration.





Whatever it is, this addictive game, *Diablo*, has something that lifts it magical helm and shoulders above the rest of the typical sword-and-sorcery fare.

Entertainment Weekly, 30 May 1997

■ Newer players might appreciate seeing this retro version of the boss encounter with the Skeleton King Leoric.

DLC was possible, that Diablo would also allow players to purchase "mini-expansions" that would add in new items, quests and the like to continue playing. The only reason it didn't happen, he says, is because of the, "complications associated with that once the game went multiplayer."

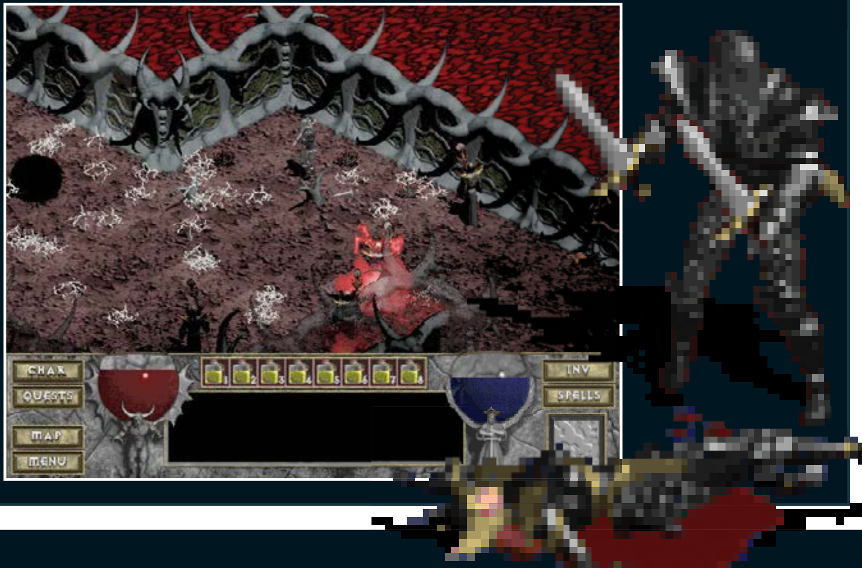
Perhaps it's hard to imagine *Diablo* as a turn-based, single-player only RPG with a claymation visual style, but that was the pitch and that's what Blizzard took on. So why, exactly, did all this change? Diablo became significant because it changed the typical RPG from turn-based and made it much more direct, gave the combat much more impact, brought with it so much more action. "Real-time was becoming very popular," added Brevik, neatly overlooking the fact that Blizzard itself had been one of the driving forces behind this new style of gaming. "Strategy games were going from 4X games to real-time to RTS at the time. It was taking that idea and making it more action oriented for the modern day." *Diablo* began development as a turn-based game and, for a while, that was where the game was headed. The team at Condor worked away on it, all the while Blizzard would pester Brevik to try the game as a real-time RPG instead. "They suggested – the guys from Blizzard – that it would be a good idea to turn it into real-time instead of turn-based. I was really opposed to it, actually, and it was a big controversy in the office, there were a lot of people that were in favour of trying it but I was adamantly opposed to doing this because I really loved turn-based. The thing I loved about roguelikes was that every turn mattered, right? The strategy would come out of the games at these tense points [where your character could die permanently]. I didn't want to lose that tension, so I was really opposed to this idea."

This became such a big deal for the development of *Diablo* that Condor would take it to a vote to discover who was interested in trying the game as a real-time

SIN AND PUNISHMENT

Brevik on the difficulties of including permadeath into Diablo

THAT WAS A big part of what I wanted. I wanted permadeath, but obviously that was kind of frowned upon because it makes people quit the game, forever. So how are we going to combine this? We had an idea for permadeath and what we were going to do about those kind of things, but eventually permadeath did eventually make it into the series with Hardcore mode – but we wanted to make sure that people would know what they were getting into. So offering both experiences in the end was really the right decision, but I always loved that tension. It was love/hate for sure, with the harshness of death. And I think if you're going to have an experience like that, then you have to be really careful about how long that experience is before your character is going to permanently die.

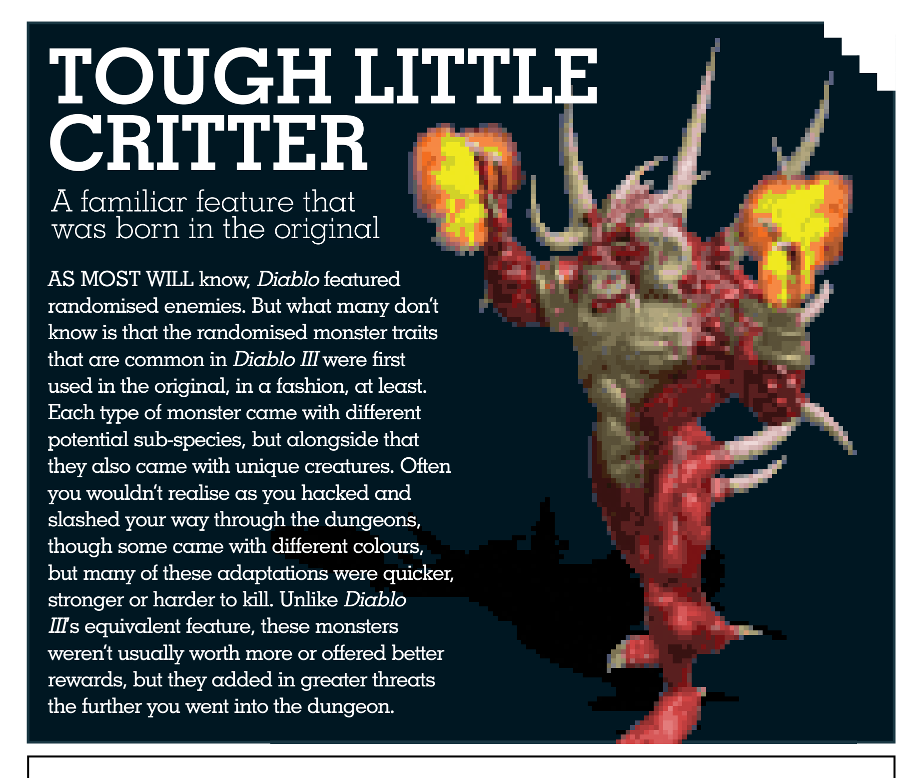




action game and find out who would rather keep it as it was. "There were only a couple of us that voted to keep it turn-based," laughed Brevik, "it was an overwhelming majority that wanted to try real-time." With democracy at work, Brevik set to work on making the changes happen. "So I called up Blizzard and said 'Well this is going to be a big delay'. We originally signed the contract to do *Diablo* for $300,000 – which was way under budget, because we were the worst businessmen in the world. I was a computer science major, I didn't know anything about business. I said 'It's going to take some time to convert it from turn-based to real-time' and I convinced them to give us an extra milestone, extra payment out of this – and you know every little bit counted when you signed such a dumb contract. That was on the Thursday or a Friday, and I sat down on that Friday afternoon and I coded it up in the afternoon and I converted the game from turn-based to real-time."

This was a standout moment for both Brevik and *Diablo*. "I can still remember exactly what had happened like it was yesterday," he recalled, describing the "defining moment" when he first clicked on an enemy skeleton, the character walked over and smashed it apart. "It fell to the ground and I was like 'Oh my god, this is so awesome, this is so much better than anything I've ever played before'. I knew right away that it was the right decision, and I converted the whole game to real-time. People went home on the Friday and they came back on Monday and the game was real-time and we never looked back from there after that experience."

While there's no doubting Brevik and his team's work on *Diablo* was nothing short of outstanding, it's hard to overlook the guiding hand of Blizzard in this case. Would another publisher have so doggedly chased a change in playstyle? Would it even have been published when so many other publishers were calling PC games – especially RPGs – a dead end? This wouldn't be the only change Blizzard would enforce, however. The *Diablo* we know now was also well known for its multiplayer, a common thread among the PC titles of the time. Blizzard, again, had looked to enact that into *Diablo*. "In theory the very first pitch was single-player," said Brevik, "we wanted to do multiplayer but we had no networking experience." According to Brevik, Blizzard had insisted that *Diablo* was going to be multiplayer, to which he and his team unconfidently accepted. They had no skills in this department, but agreed it would be a great addition to the game. For about a year Blizzard would

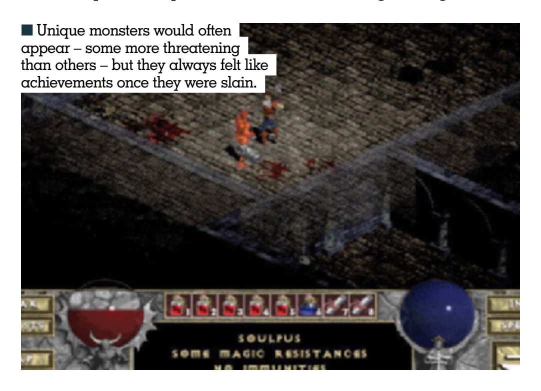


TOUGH LITTLE CRITTER

A familiar feature that was born in the original

AS MOST WILL know, *Diablo* featured randomised enemies. But what many don't know is that the randomised monster traits that are common in *Diablo III* were first used in the original, in a fashion, at least. Each type of monster came with different potential sub-species, but alongside that they also came with unique creatures. Often you wouldn't realise as you hacked and slashed your way through the dungeons, though some came with different colours, but many of these adaptations were quicker, stronger or harder to kill. Unlike *Diablo III*'s equivalent feature, these monsters weren't usually worth more or offered better rewards, but they added in greater threats the further you went into the dungeon.

WE HAD HOPED THAT IT WOULD SELL LIKE 25,000 COPIES, SO WE COULD BREAK EVEN AND PERHAPS CONVINCE SOMEONE THAT WE COULD MAKE A SEQUEL



■ Unique monsters would often appear – some more threatening than others – but they always felt like achievements once they were slain.

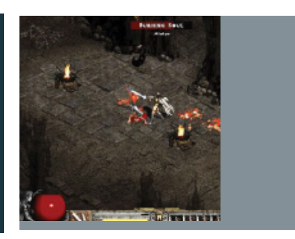


> A GAMING EVOLUTION

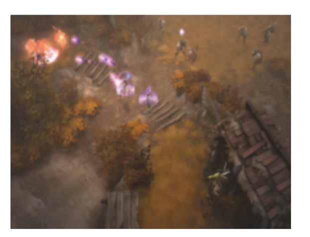
Diablo > Diablo II > Diablo III



The sequel improved on absolutely everything – including more stable multiplayer – while retaining what kept *Diablo* so distinctly impressive to begin with.



Diablo III was an online-only title – much to the dismay of the diehard fanbase – adding a more detailed overworld (without random tiles) and added in a heap of new features (like runes).



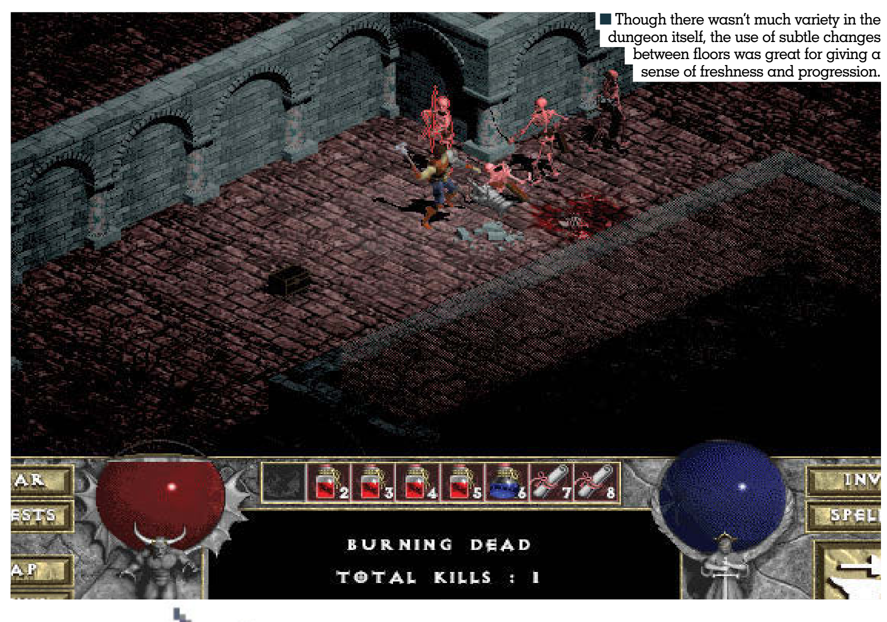
regularly check in on the progress of *Diablo*'s multiplayer, and the answer was always "It's going well". "Meanwhile it wasn't multiplayer at all," admitted Brevik, "and Blizzard said 'Well we're going to do this battle.net thing and we need it to be multiplayer' and so then they came around and asked to take a look at it. It wasn't running at all, and they said 'Oh my god, this isn't ready for multiplayer at all'." In response, a couple of developers from Blizzard – Condor at this point had been bought out and renamed Blizzard North – moved up to the company for a couple of months to exclusively work on the multiplayer portion of *Diablo*. "It educated us on how it worked and things like that, it was a superb experience. And with that experience we were able to do the conversion of *Diablo* to client-server and things like that for *Diablo II*. Without their expertise it would never have been multiplayer."

But *Diablo* wasn't great – or innovative – solely on the back of these two features, and Blizzard's input really didn't amount to all that much in the end. Aside from suggesting a move to real-time and its help in bringing the game online, *Diablo*'s development was all done by Brevik and his team at Condor. In fact, it was arguably the key elements that had been in the design brief from the start that guided the historic game to the hall of fame. "Randomisation was always planned from the beginning," said Brevik of the loot-driven gameplay mechanic that is so integral to *Diablo* and any *Diablo* clone since. "And that really comes from the roguelike influences that we had. That was really the biggest key feature, and that really kept the scope down. We were able to have several levels underneath this town, that kind of structure where the town is set but all the dungeons are random, that really was the basis for which the structure of the game existed. The randomness really allowed for replayability, and that just came from the roguelike games. That was always a very compelling part of those experiences for me, and so I wanted to make sure that was a part of *Diablo*."

But arguably the element that really helped *Diablo* stand out – and has perhaps kept it so significant to this day – was its visual design. Brevik explains that they didn't "want to do elves, dwarves and things like that" and instead forwent the typical kind of RPG fantasy tropes for something a little more unique. "We wanted it to be more dark, Gothic, gritty," we're told, "and that came from the atmosphere of what the dungeon looked like and the lighting and making this dark, semi-realistic, bloody kind of experience. It was very different than many other RPGs. We wanted that." There were so many disparate elements that helped make Diablo truly stand out as an RPG, and though the visual design and story elements were initially drawing players in by the millions, it was the changes to RPG gameplay – the multiplayer, the randomisation, the real-time action – that combined to make something truly new. "It's hard to really comprehend how many changes we made to RPGs with this product. This was very radical in many ways, and all of these things did not really exist in the genre before."

Despite that, *Diablo* wasn't a surefire success for the team. Maybe Blizzard had believed in the product and anticipated great results, but for Brevik they were hoping only to break even and that they "might have been able to convince somebody to let us make a sequel or something like that". In fact, Brevik told us their expectation was a meagre 25,000 copies (*Diablo* went on to sell 2.5 million), though there was something that gave him hope. "We never really had high expectations for how many copies of the game we would sell, but we could tell it was going to be something special in that the people working on the game were staying late, not going home, and they were playing the game after work. I knew that was unusual. People were having so much fun with this product before it was even out that they were hanging out at the office playing the game that they had been working on all day." However, the company also released a demo disc in two very notable places: the first was alongside an issue of *PC Gamer*, the second was bundled in a disc that Microsoft had produced to herald the benefits of DirectX – a disc that was given out to 1 million people for free.

As we now know, *Diablo* was a smash hit. Brevik admitted there are things he would have done differently – if he had known how big it would become – but remains humble despite the great success the series has built over the years. Most of all, he recalled the fondness of working alongside and, after Condor's purchase, for Blizzard just as it was beginning to become a household name everyone would adore. "The company was really starting to rise," he said of Blizzard's release of *WarCraft* and *WarCraft II*, "and then here comes *Diablo* on the heels of those things; that really started letting them take off. We were on a string of bigger and bigger hits, and it was just a superb time to work there. It was a lot of fun. It's such a blessing to a part of that experience."



Though there wasn't much variety in the dungeon itself, the use of subtle changes between floors was great for giving a sense of freshness and progression.

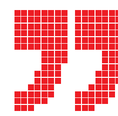


WHAT THEY SAID…



Diablo is the best game to come out in the past year, and you should own a copy. Period.

GameSpot, 1996





INTERVIEW

GARRY NEWMAN

When Half-Life 2's Source engine was released to the public, Garry Newman created the free sandbox building tool Garry's Mod. Valve loved it, signed him up, and this year the game celebrates ten years on Steam.

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Facewound (2002) [unreleased]
Creator and developer



Garry's Mod (2004)
Creator and developer



RUST (2013)
Creator and developer



Were games always a part of your life? What were your favourites growing up?
Early on, my family had a Sinclair Spectrum. Every game that I played was on the Spectrum and it was the Dizzy games that I played most. I loved adventure games.

Was making your own games something you always wanted to do?
The Dizzy games were made by the Oliver twins obviously, so it was always in the back of my mind - when I was around six or seven years old - that these 12 and 13 year old lads had made these games. I was always like, 'well, if they can do it, surely I can.'

When did you learn to code yourself?
Hmm... I don't think I've actually learnt yet - I'm still learning! No, it was probably when I was about eight or nine when I was learning to read. I'd often type sentences into the Spectrum and stuff happened. I'd clear the screen, start again and it just evolved from there, really. I suppose it was programming websites that threw it forward a lot - there's a lot in common with programming the back end of websites that helps you learn C++ and stuff like that.

You were originally working on a game called *Facewound* - what was it about and what happened to it?
That was a sidescrolling 2D shooter where you shot zombies. It was kind of like *Mario* versus *Half-Life*. I was working on that non-stop and then when Valve asked if I wanted to sell *Garry's Mod* it fell by the wayside. It was hard to do but this happened because no one was interested in *Facewound*, really, and everybody was interested in *Garry's Mod*. It was a common sense thing to do.

Would you ever return to it?
We actually have a version of it working in Unity, but I don't know if it's fun and I don't know if we can be bothered to complete it. We might release it for free at some point. Never say never.

Is it true *Garry's Mod* happened totally by accident?
Yeah, there was another mod called *JB Mod* and everybody was playing that. *Half-Life 2* had come out and the Source engine had been released. While *Half-Life 2* was enjoyable, I felt like you never had the chance to explore the engine - you saw physics but you didn't really have the chance to play with



GARRY ON WHAT HE LEARNED FROM GARRY'S MOD WHEN MAKING FOLLOW-UP RUST

"From a design point of view, it's about giving the players as much freedom as you can. It's best to stand back a bit and let the players decide what they want to do and learn from that. From a development point of view it's to employ a long-term development strategy, rather than making a game in a year and throwing it out and working on a sequel. It's more important to grow the community slowly, rather than trying to get everything done in the first month."


Character models from Valve's back catalogue are available from the off - such as *Team Fortress 2* and the *Half-Life* series.

GARRY ON THE VARIETY OF USER-MADE GAME MODES

"One of the great things about *Garry's Mod* is you can join a server and have no idea what it's going to be when you get in there. There's a bunch of different game modes, like the G-Mod Terror stuff, that's like a mod inside a mod inside a mod. They've kind of made their own standalone game now, which is kind of great from our point of view. *Garry's Mod* introduced them to [game design] and showed them how easy it is."

them. There were a lot of objects that we saw in the game fleetingly, however we didn't get to play with them properly. When the Source engine mod came out and you could spawn these things and tie things together, that was interesting.

The *JB Mod* had at that point started to stagnate - the guy that made it got into *World Of Warcraft* and stopped making it, I think - so I started playing with it a bit more and began to work out how easy it was to do certain things. It snowballed from there.

Was there a point where you realised it was beginning to take off, that people were interested in *Garry's Mod*?

Because people were into *JB Mod* so much, there were some people asking why I was trying to copy it - it was a little bit aggressive at first. As *Garry's Mod* got better, and when people could see it was different from *JB Mod* and was advancing, they started to come around. It seemed most people then preferred *Garry's Mod*.

Then Valve began to show interest. How did that feel?

It was pretty incredible, really. I remember playing the original *Half-Life* and I must have played through the opening metro level - where the names are rolling at the foot of the screen - I must have seen those names hundreds of times, so to be emailing those very people years later was crazy.

Up until the Steam launch, *Garry's Mod* was free - when did you realise this could be an actual career for you?

I didn't realise until about a week after we'd started selling it. I expected to sell a couple of thousand copies, and then it would die off and that'd be it. It sustained the sales and I quickly realised that I earned more in a week than I would at a job in a year. It seemed ridiculous not to pursue it.

What was the reaction of people around you at that point - family, friends etc.?

My mum and dad still don't really have any idea what's going on. I talk to my dad and he'll always be like, 'what do you do all day?' and 'so you just look at a computer and press buttons?' He has no idea. I think they might even have been suspicious at first - I flew out to America to the first dev days just before signing *Garry's Mod* when I was 19. I was flying to the US and they couldn't get their heads around it. I think at the time there was a story about a man meeting someone online and eating him so they were worried in that way as well. It took a lot of convincing to prove to them it was legitimate.

***Garry's Mod* costs a mere £6.99 and has done since 2004. How did you decide on the price?**

I think the price has something to do with modesty, in a way. I don't see it going up. I had $10 in my head because it was free before that and I didn't want to ask people




While it is possible to play *Garry's Mod* from a serious perspective, there's also plenty of scope to have fun.


Garry's Mod offers players a sophisticated toolkit that allows for a whole host of different play styles.





Rust is Facepunch Studios' follow-up to Garry's Mod - an open-world similarly sprawling playground where anything goes

to pay crazy money for it. I remember being at a meeting with Valve where everyone was eating Subway sandwiches - I suggested $10 and they said even if people complained at that price, the sandwiches they were eating cost more than that. Really, in the scheme of things, it was no big deal.

With little prior coding knowledge - is it safe to say you were learning on the job?
With *Garry's Mod*, definitely. I was telling some of the lads in the Facepunch Studios office the other day that with the first two versions I didn't have any Source control, so if the game was crashing I literally had to throw all of the work up to that point away and start again. I'd then hope it'd be a bit neater that next time.

How do you deal with that frustration?
It was hard work, but when you have something like that you learn more than when it's easy. You have to work through it; that's why you're there.

And is this learning process something you've carried over into the development of *RUST*?
[Laughs] I like to think we're a bit more professional now. It's less trial and error. Well, it's less trial and error in terms of gameplay. In terms of coding - we hope we're mostly getting it right.

What do you think it is about sandbox games where players can craft what they want that's so appealing?
I suppose it's about using your own imagination and being able to do whatever you want. You can get a game like chess where it's just one game - there's only so many things you can do with it. With a game like *Garry's Mod* you can come up with your own ways to play and if you get bored of that you can write your own mods or create your own add-ons; there's the Steam Workshop to download new stuff. It's unlimited content if there's enough people involved.

This year marks your tenth year on Steam - could you have foreseen its popularity and success a decade ago?
No way. When Valve first suggested that I sell it I thought it was a stupid idea. That no one was going to buy it and why would we even think about charging for it. Luckily, the guys at Valve were really persistent to put it up on Steam - my life could have worked out a lot different otherwise.

Will there ever be a Garry's Mod 2?
There will be, yeah. It won't be called *Garry's Mod*, though. I hate that name so much.

Really? Did it just stick at the time?
Everybody tells me it's a good name and that it speaks to the modesty of it, but I hate having my name in it. When people ask me what games I make and I'm forced to say my own name... I hate it.

What would you have called it instead?
I can't really say because that's going to be the name of the second game and I don't want people to buy all the domain names ahead of time!

What's your fondest or funniest memory of making *Garry's Mod*?
There are lots of stories - deleting the code during the first versions is probably the funniest. When I told Valve no at first, that I wasn't going to sell *Garry's Mod*, and they came back and convinced me, I remember I had to fax the contract off. They asked me if I had a fax machine, and, wanting to act professional, I said yeah. I went out and bought one and they asked me to sign the contract and fax it back. I said no problem, but then faxed it upside down. At their end this meant they received ten sheets of blank paper. They told me that it had come through blank and asked that I send it again. I did the same thing. It must have been about four or five times before they said: 'are you sure you're scanning the correct side?' There's a few stories like that. I probably should have read the instructions on the fax machine!



Chrono Trigger features over a dozen possible endings. Some revel in your success or failure through the main story, while some are just plain weird.

GAME CHANGERS

CHRONO TRIGGER

Released: 11 March 1995 **Publisher:** In-house **Developer:** Square **System:** SNES

Created by gaming's first development supergroup, this RPG from Square would come to be one of the most influential and expressive games ever released

THE INDUSTRY HAS changed a lot in the last 20 years. Gaming has grown up, the hardware has evolved and the technology driving play has given us incredibly cinematic experiences – though none of these achievements are a substitute for real quality or raw ambition. Back in 1995, for Nintendo's SNES, Square assembled what can only be described as a 'dream team' of developers; a group of RPG aficionados that would come together to create one of the most ambitious and influential games of the modern era, one that stands (arguably) uncontested even to this day.

Chrono Trigger's supergroup team consisted of three core members: the creator of *Final Fantasy*, Hironobu Sakaguchi; the creator of *Dragon Quest*, Yuji Horii; and creator of *Dragon Ball*, Akira Toriyama. That trio was then joined by legendary *Final Fantasy* designers Takashi Tokita, Yoshinori Kitase and Akihiko Matsui, as well as respected composers Yasunori Mitsuda and Nobuo Uematsu. You couldn't ask for a better team, and so perhaps it should come as no real surprise that *Chrono Trigger* so effortlessly stood the test of time – the extent of its influence impossible to gauge in any real tangible sense.

The group conceived one of the most complex narratives and technologically advanced games of the era, its ambition matched only by its various successes. On the surface it doesn't seem wholly original – even for the RPG genre. You've got your silent protagonist, your world-ending catastrophe looming over a near horizon and a large array of lovable characters to internally debate between as you look to build a perfect squad of unlikely heroes. But it's the

BEST BOSS

THE TOUGHEST FIGHTS YOU'LL FIND IN CHRONO TRIGGER



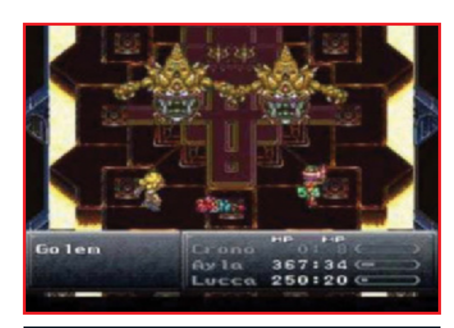
LAVOS

★ You'll encounter Lavos twice in *Chrono Trigger*, though your battle with the big bad is more challenging the first time around. The Ocean Palace fight is still a nightmare, with Lavos exhibiting stronger and faster attacks, with three times as much as its usual HP.



GIGA GAIA

★ Found at the peak of the Mountain Of Woe (because where else), Giga Gaia is an elemental creature that'll destroy any team that hasn't taken the time to stock up on shadow and fire elemental protection; 12000 BC has never been so deadly or stressful.



THE GOLEM SISTERS

★ The twin Golem fight represents one of those occasions where you'll be kicked in the teeth over and over again if you have not ground out enough XP. This is the battle most players usually realise that they are woefully underpowered, it's a total nightmare.

way in which *Chrono Trigger* brought together all of its elements that's truly impressive, even to this day.

The story is cast across time, with the group of adventurers travelling between 65 million BC to 2300 AD to try to stop a global catastrophe. You'll be shifting between the prehistoric age, the Middle Ages and a post-apocalyptic future – each area giving you the opportunity to watch the world and landmarks warp under the demands of time itself. It's this twisting narrative that gave way to one of *Chrono Trigger*'s most famous elements, an adventure that would culminate in one of 13 endings depending on how you fared against apocalyptic-demon king, Lavos.

■■■ But at the time is wasn't the depth of the story that drew praise, but the characters themselves – something many modern RPGs seem to have fallen out of touch with. Considering the technology Square was working with at the time, such fluid character development was unheard of. Everybody on the roster had dreams to realise and personal demons holding them back from finding their true potential. You can work with, and build relationships with, each and every one of them; the game doesn't penalise you for choosing certain team compositions, instead it rewards you by furthering your understanding of their motivations. These heroes are some of the richest characters to grace the RPG, it only helped to strengthen the narrative and set a new benchmark for genre games to strive towards.

Still, for all of *Chrono Trigger*'s success with character and narrative, it was Square's delivery on superb gameplay that ensures it stands the test of time. The SNES gave us many beloved games, but not many could match *Chrono Trigger* in terms of visual flair and impeccable flow. Battles took place out in the field map (as opposed to random encounters) and the natural, near-seamless transition between exploration to battle encounters helped imbue *Chrono Trigger* with an immediacy that it has never lost. We mentioned before that you could choose custom team compositions, which also brings a new tactical edge to combat – several combos of double and triple attacks (Techs) are discovered through specific character pairings, there's still plenty to discover after your first play through.

And to think, this was all pulled off on the SNES. A fantastic console for sure, but ultimately it has a limited processing power, not that it stopped the dream team from delivering on almost every area. Considering the scope of the narrative, the depth of the battle system and the wonderful character development, you'd think *Chrono Trigger* would have to cut corners somewhere, right? That wasn't the case, with it also impressing with beautiful sprites, gorgeous backdrops, enemy animations through battles and one of the best scores ever committed to a videogame. *Chrono Trigger* didn't just change the way we think about RPGs, it also proved that it doesn't matter what technology developers have access to – ultimately it's the talent on a project, not the tools, that make a masterpiece.

SQUARE ASSEMBLED A 'DREAM TEAM' OF DEVELOPERS THAT WOULD CREATE ONE OF THE MOST AMBITIOUS AND INFLUENTIAL GAMES OF THE MODERN ERA

KEY FACTS

■ Back in the Nineties, the original SNES version of the game went out of print making it a highly coveted collectors item. Thankfully, *Chrono Trigger* is now readily available via the PlayStation Store, Nintendo's Virtual Console and on the Nintendo DS.

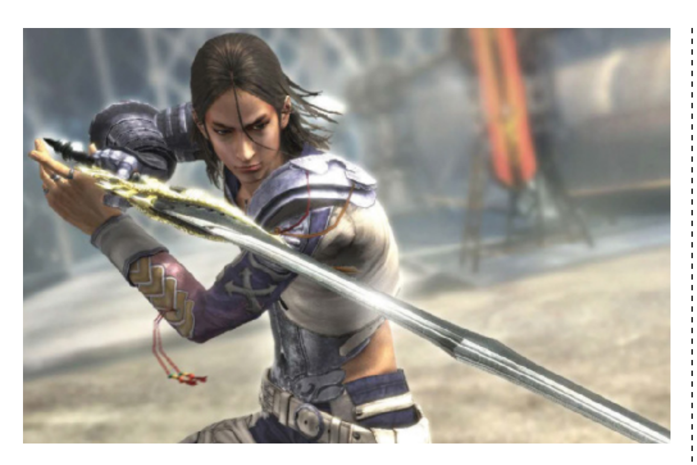
■ *Chrono Trigger*'s battle system is a variation of the Active Time Battle System that was famously used in the early *Final Fantasy* games, debuting in *Final Fantasy IV* in 1991, but was then adapted to allow for more depth in this new adventure.



GAME CHANGERS

DETAILING THE DREAM TEAM

BEHIND CHRONO TRIGGER WAS A TEAM OF SOME OF THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST IN THE JAPANESE DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY, THESE ARE THE GAMES THEY HAVE PLAYED A PART IN CREATING



HIRONOBU SAKAGUCHI

■ Hironobu Sakaguchi, the producer and creator of the Final Fantasy series, conceived *Chrono Trigger* back in 1992. He served as director over the first five entries of the Final Fantasy series, helping to establish many of the RPG systems and mechanics that are still used to this day. His last major release was Mistwalker's *Lost Odyssey* for Xbox 360 in 2007.



AKIRA TORIYAMA

■ Potentially the most famous of the development team behind *Chrono Trigger*, Toriyama is best known as the creator of anime *Dr. Slump* and *Dragon Ball*. Toriyama was brought in during the early stages of development to design the characters and settings; he would later team up with Sakaguchi a decade later to design characters for *Blue Dragon*.



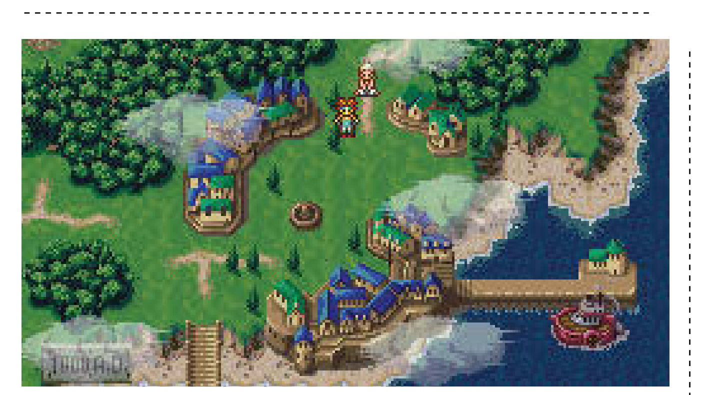
YUJI HORII

■ Yuji Horii is the creator of the Dragon Quest series – once the biggest competitor to Final Fantasy – though that didn't stop him from teaming up with his RPG rival Sakaguchi for *Chrono Trigger*. Horii would write scenarios and supervise *Chrono Trigger*'s writing teams before returning to work on Dragon Quest, for which he still serves as general director.



KAZUHIKO AOKI

■ Once the core trio had been assembled and began trying to figure out how to make *Chrono Trigger* a reality, Kazuhiko Aoki offered his services as a producer and the project began moving forward. Aoki worked largely behind the scenes as a battle designer on early Final Fantasy projects, including *IV* and *V*. His activity has subsided somewhat in recent years.



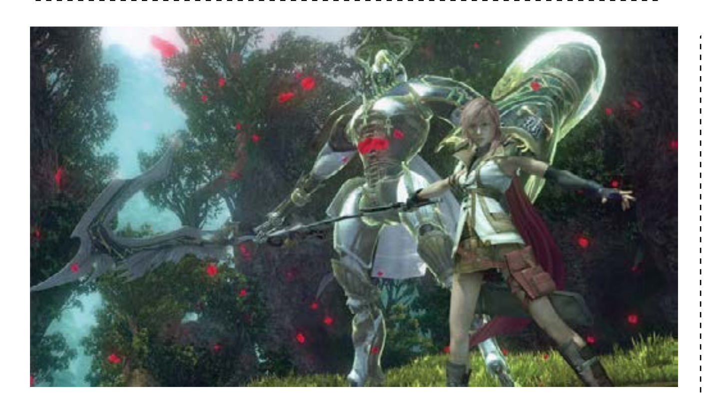
MASATO KATO

■ Scenario writer Masato Kato was brought in alongside 60 other developers to brainstorm initial ideas, and was later appointed as the story planner. While he originally vetoed the idea of a time-travel themed game, he was convinced of the idea by supervisor Horii. Kato would go on to direct a sequel, the 1999 PlayStation exclusive, *Chrono Cross*.



AKIHIKO MATSUI

■ Brought in as a battle designer and planner for *Final Fantasy IV* and *V*, Akihiko Matsui would bring his expertise to the RPG, becoming responsible for getting enemy sprites moving in battles, a huge accomplishment at the time. Matsui would then lead the combat system design teams for *Final Fantasy XI* and *XIV: A Realm Reborn*.



YOSHINORI KITASE

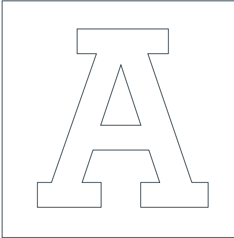
■ A name many Final Fantasy fans will be familiar with, Yoshinori Kitase caught a break on *Chrono Trigger* after serving as a director on *Final Fantasy VI* the previous year. Kitase was largely responsible for writing the various sub-plots that surrounded the multiple endings. Kitase would go on to direct *Final Fantasy VII*, *VIII*, *X* and produce the *XIII* trilogy.



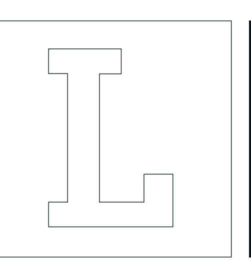
TAKASHI TOKITA

■ Though he is now the head of Square Enix's Business Division 9, *Chrono Trigger* would be Tokita's directorial debut. He was responsible for writing sub-plots, and oversaw much of the development with graphic designer Tetsuya Takahashi. He may be credited with a 'special thanks' these days, but his influence on *Chrono Trigger* can't be overlooked.











CLOUD REVOLVER PRO GAMING STEREO HEADSET

MANUFACTURER: **HYPERX** PRICE: **£88.99**

HYPERX'S UPGRADE TO its Cloud headset line has its faults, but in balance we'd say it comes out as one of the stronger headsets in this price range we've tested in recent months. For a start there can be no arguing with the sound quality that the Cloud range has been giving games, and the Cloud Revolver is no different. Two slightly angled 50mm drivers direct sound right inside your ears for a clear and crisp audio experience. The rich range of sound is delivered to you with nice rounded bass, solid mids and highs all coming through strong with little to no muddying or noticeable loss of clarity.

In terms of the build of the headset, it's a big improvement on previous models, not that they were all that shabby. The metal band that forms the frame of the headset is solid, the memory foam of the cups is very comfortable and there's a nice matte finish to all the plastic components. There are no flashy lights or LEDs on this headset. It's all very practical and purposeful.

But sadly practicality is probably the one place where these cans fall a little short. In part thanks to the metal frame that should make these headphones a universal fit, the Cloud Revolver headset isn't an easy set of headphones to travel with. If the metal frame is touched or tapped it can be an unnerving experience inside the ear cups too. And the fixed frame means that the headset isn't always as firmly secured on your head as you might hope.

Still, for use at home this strikes us as a fine headset with all of the audio requirements you could want and an excellent mic attachment for online play too.



GAMING CLOTHING



SYNTH T

Gametee prides itself on high-quality, classy gaming designs, and this *Fallout 4*-inspired tee is a very good example. It's a subtle nod to the game that feels like it could be from a boutique store.
www.gametee.co.uk



LEGEND BLACKWORK TATTOO

With hand drawn tattoo art by AJ Hateley taking its cues from *The Legend Of Zelda*, we don't think we've ever seen a Nintendo-related piece of apparel that's as trendy as this.
www.gametee.co.uk



KOJIMA SWEATSHIRT

Some people like to wear the name of their favourite sports team emblazoned across their chest, others go for labels, but why not game developers? This striking sweatshirt is one of a series from Gametee.
www.gametee.co.uk

AV1200 GIGABIT PASS-THROUGH POWERLINE AC WIFI KIT

SOLD BY: **TP-LINK** PRICE: **£124.99**



FOR GAMERS ATTEMPTING to maintain good online connections in a multi-room, multi-internet user household, investing in Powerline Passthrough kits like this one might be the answer to all your connection woes. Kits like this allow you to extend your WiFi service and improve signal throughout your home, bypassing issues of having the router on a different floor or on the other side of solid walls.

This TP-Link kit, for example, can be plugged in next to your main router and then setup to send the signal to a sister unit plugged into another room. Not only can you then connect to a new WiFi signal being sent out by the AV1200, you can also plug up to three Ethernet cables into the unit for even more secure connections to the internet.

The setup instructions included were a little minimalist, to the point we weren't sure we had done it at all correctly, but once things appeared to be complete, connecting up to the devices from consoles and smartphones was a breeze. We found it particularly handy for hooking up a Steam Link device in the leaving room, away from our PC setup.
www.amazon.co.uk

VERDICT 7/10



The mouse comes with two different types of cable. There's a short rubber cased version and a longer fabric chord.

The readout on the side can be customised with a number of different logos and images.

RIVAL 700 GAMING MOUSE

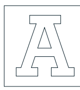
SOLD BY: **STEELSERIES** PRICE: **£85.99**

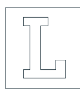
THIS IS A very impressive mouse for its price range. While it may be wired and not wireless as some prefer, you can't argue with the precision, build quality and customisation of the Rival 700. The mouse has a nice weight to it for starters, giving you just enough heft in your hand to not feel weightless as you move your cursor around. The matte finish on the right and left click buttons is very comfortable and contrasts nicely with the slightly smoother material that is used as the default body cover for the palm of you hand. Some nice texturing on the sidegrips gives the whole mouse a variety of tactile indicators that keep you on track when you play.

The downloadable software to the mouse includes all of the usual light customisation options to change the illumination of the mouse, but one of the really cool small touches is the LED readout on the inside left of the mouse that can be customized to a whole bunch of different animated gifs and messages. While this isn't a cheap mouse for being wired, it's still a very comfortable and precise one and that counts for a lot in our book.
www.steelseries.com

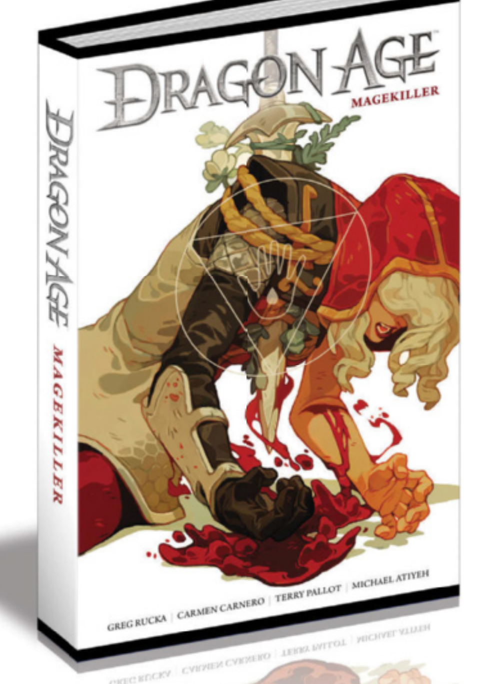
VERDICT 9/10











DRAGON AGE: MAGEKILLER

PUBLISHER: **DARK HORSE**

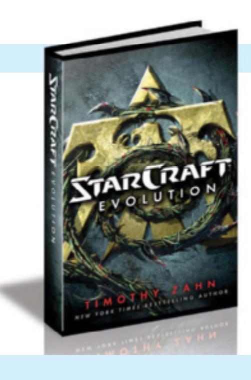
ACTING AS A parallel story to *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, *Magekiller* offers an interesting insight into some of the broader social issues and politics of the Thedas. Of course that's really just the background to what is primarily the tale of a pair of assassins for hire who take out rogue and dangerous mages.

Those familiar with BioWare's fantasy world will know how potentially divisive such a profession will be and it doesn't take long for the tale's leads, Tessa and Marius, to get caught in the web of Tevinter, the Venatori and the Inquisition.

Written by Greg Rucka, a veteran comic book writer with credits from *Batman* and *Supergirl* to *Wolverine* and *Daredevil*, the whole story is narrated by Tessa, offering a grounded view of the events around her and the battles she finds herself fighting alongside Marius. While it has a tendency to drop a lot of loose threads that never get picked up along the way, Rucka does a nice job of building on the *Inquisition* tale.

And by extension that's the only real weakness of this story; that it's very much a companion to *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and not a standalone tale. It sometimes leans a little too heavily on knowledge of the game world than telling its own story. That said, the art is great, Rucka's take on things is refreshing and it's a pleasure to return to this world. If you're well versed in the lore and trilogy, you'll find much to admire and enjoy with this expansion of things.

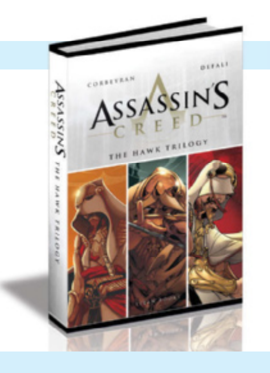
www.darkhorse.com



STARCRAFT: EVOLUTION

Going deeper into the lore of Blizzard's sci-fi universe, *Evolution* looks at a post-war era for terrans, protoss and zerg as attempts are made to secure the peace between them. Can these warring factions be brought together? You will have to read the book to find out, but we don't imagine it will be smooth sailing.

www.titanbooks.com



ASSASSIN'S CREED: THE HAWK TRILOGY

This new collection binds together the time-twisting experiences of Jonathan Hawk and his escapades back to Ancient Egypt in volumes 4, 5 and 6 of the *Assassin's Creed* comic series. These have always been a fun expansion to Ubisoft's universe, daring to travel to places the game has not.

www.titanbooks.com



HALO: FRACTURES

If delving into the heavy depths of the *Halo* expanded universe seems a little daunting to you then this collection of short stories in the world of the UNSC and Covenant may be a good entry point. From the earliest history of the forerunners to the rise of the Guardians, this book has a little of everything.

www.forbiddenplanet.com



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Cover Image

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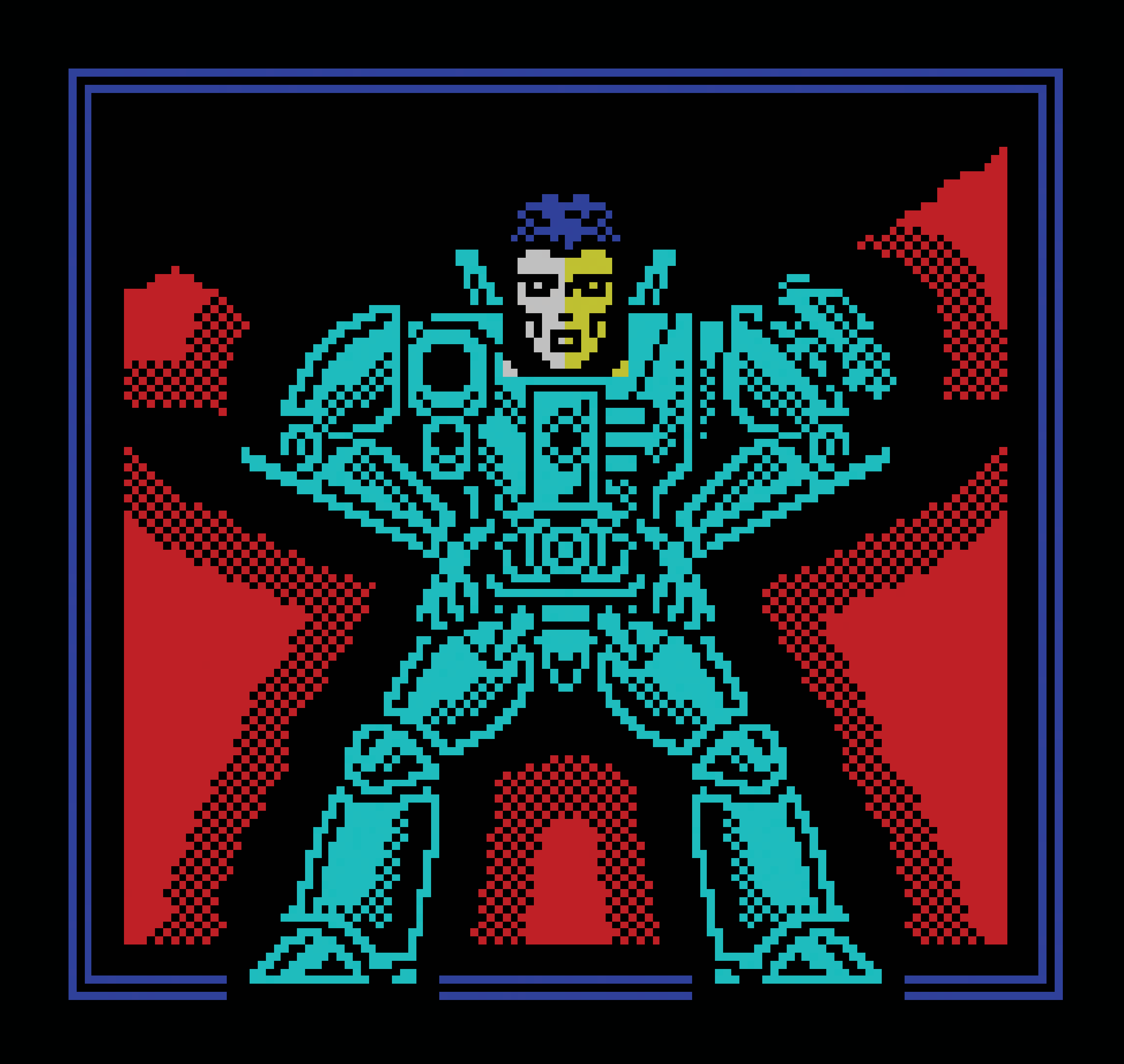
Printing & Distribution

Printed by Southernprint Ltd, 17-21 Factory Road, Upton Ind. Estate, Poole, Dorset, BH16 5SN
☎ 01202 628 300
Distributed in the UK, Eire & the Rest of the World by Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU.
☎ 0203 787 9060
www.marketforce.co.uk
Distributed in Australia by Gordon & Gotch Australia Pty Ltd, 26 Rodborough Road, Frenchs Forest, NSW 2086 Australia
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ISSN 1478-5889







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